

ANALYSIS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE
OF KURSK IN JULY 1943

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

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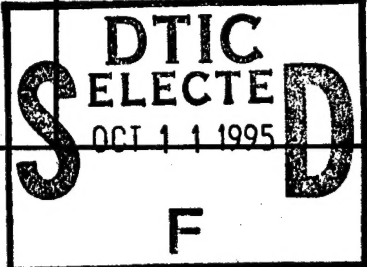
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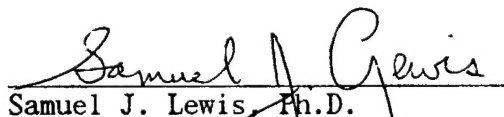
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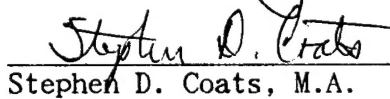
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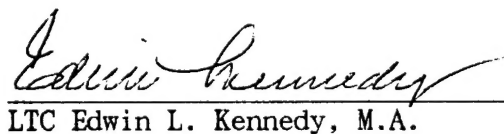
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ABSTRACT

ANALYSIS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE OF KURSK IN JULY 1943 by
MAJ Enrique Ramos, USA, 125 pages.

This is a study on the results of Operation "Citadel," the Battle of Kursk. This was the greatest tank engagement of World War II. Unfortunately, there is a general lack of knowledge about this battle. Probably most Western historians believe that Stalingrad was the decisive battle on the Eastern Front. However, many authorities consider "Citadel" the decisive turning point.

This study used Soviet, Anglo-American, and German primary and secondary sources. Sources include books, journals, articles, theses, and dissertations. The results are important because, with "Citadel" being the greatest tank battle of the war, it has many lessons that are still important to the conduct of today's army operations.

"Citadel" was the decisive battle on the Eastern Front in World War II because after this battle the initiative passed to the Soviets, who would never lose it again. However, it would be more appropriate to say that Germany was defeated by the combined effects of the Battles of Moscow in 1941, Stalingrad in 1942, and Kursk in 1943. The significance of "Citadel" was that it destroyed the remaining German offensive strength. "Citadel" depleted what was left of the German strategic reserves. After "Citadel" Germany was unable to mount further major offensives against the Soviet Union. As events would show, after this battle Germany could not even defend successfully.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On 22 June 1941, almost two years after initiating World War II, Hitler started the war between Germany and the Soviet Union sending three German army groups into Soviet Russia.¹ After spectacular initial victories, the Soviets stopped the German advance in December 1941 in front of Moscow. The Soviets demonstrated that Germany was not invincible. When the summer of 1942 came, the Germans again took the initiative. No longer able to attack along the entire Eastern Front, the Germans concentrated in the South, with the aim of capturing the Caucasus oil fields.² This led to the Battle of Stalingrad, which ended on 2 February 1943 with the destruction of 20 German and two Rumanian divisions.³ The Soviets destroyed the entire German 6th Army.

There were three days of national mourning in Germany and for some weeks even Hitler appeared to have lost faith in his military genius.⁴ Many historians claim this was the decisive battle of the Second World War. However, by March 1943 the Germans basically still stood on the same line from which they launched their 1942 summer offensive.⁵ They mounted a counteroffensive that on 14 March allowed them to recapture Kharkov.⁶ When the summer of 1943 came, it was the Germans, not the Soviets, who took the offensive.⁷ These events showed that the German armed forces were not defeated yet. They were still capable of mounting successful offensive operations.

The German code name for the 1943 summer offensive was Operation "Citadel." This became the greatest tank engagement of World War II. The Germans attacked with about 900,000 men, 10,000 guns, 2,000 planes, 1,855 tanks, and 533 self-propelled guns. Facing them were about 1,330,000 men, 20,000 guns, 3,600 tanks, and 3,130 planes. Hitler was trying, one more time, to wrest the strategic initiative from the Soviets.⁸

Operation "Citadel" ended on 13 July, when Hitler called off the offensive. The Germans suffered a decisive defeat. From this point on Germany was unable to launch a serious offensive operation against the Soviets. Never again would they threaten the Soviets. Hitler lost forces he would never regain.⁹ The Soviets replaced their losses, and immediately after "Citadel" began offensive operations that seldom stopped until they reached Berlin in 1945.

The Battle of Kursk was the greatest tank battle of the war and its results were decisive. Thousands of tanks and aircraft and millions of men were involved. In the Battle of Stalingrad the Soviets used fourteen field armies and one tank army. At Kursk they used twenty-two full-strength field armies and five tank armies.¹⁰

Unfortunately, there is a lack of knowledge about this battle. Many World War II books highlight how important the Battle of Stalingrad was. They devote entire chapters to Stalingrad, but a couple of pages to Kursk. It would appear most Western historians believe that Stalingrad was the turning point of World War II. However, many authorities consider that Kursk was the decisive turning point.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the results of the July 1943 Battle of Kursk, fought between Germany and the Soviet Union. It will answer the following question: Was the Battle of Kursk in July 1943 the decisive battle of the Eastern Front in World War II? This paper will measure a decisive battle in terms of the point in a war where one side gains undisputed possession of the initiative, and when the outcome is basically no longer in doubt.

The primary limitation in this study was that it was restricted to using translated Soviet and German materials. This study could only use information translated into English or Spanish. The problem is that occasionally some of the original meaning is lost in the translation. Despite this, sufficient reliable sources were available to overcome this problem.

This thesis is not a study of strategy, tactics, nor Soviet and German doctrine. The scope is the analysis of the results of the Battle of Kursk. When the study mentions strategy, tactics, or doctrine, it is to give the reader a better understanding of the battle and of its results.

This study will focus on the Soviet defensive operations at Kursk, from 5 July to 13 July 1943. Subsequent Soviet offensive operations aimed at the Orel and Belgorod-Kharkov areas, although considered a part of the Battle of Kursk, are beyond the scope of this thesis. They are only mentioned briefly, to give the reader an idea on how the situation changed once Hitler canceled "Citadel."

The research method used in this thesis is historical. This thesis will analyze the Battle of Kursk in the chronological order in

which events occurred. The first part of this analysis will provide a general view of the strategic results of the 1941 and 1942 German summer offensives. Analysis of the Battle of Kursk itself will start with a description of events that led to it, followed by German and Soviet plans and preparations prior to battle, the Battle of Kursk, and then a brief discussion of the Soviet offensives immediately after Kursk. This thesis ends with a discussion of the results of the battle, conclusions and lessons learned.

To avoid any confusion, it is imperative that the reader understands the differences between the three levels of war. The levels of war defined in FM 100-5, Operations, are strategic, operational, and tactical. Each level is defined by the intended outcome of operations, not by the level of command or the size of the unit involved.¹¹

At the strategic level of war a nation or alliance uses national interests to determine their strategy to ensure an effective, responsive national power projection capability. Strategy involves the art and science of using armed forces with the other instruments of national power (military, economic, diplomatic, and informational) to secure strategic goals. Strategy is translated into military policy and requirements, which are the starting point for developing campaign plans. The campaign plan derives from policy and requirements, sets the theater strategic goals, and is the basis for operational level planning.¹²

At the operational level of war, joint and combined operational forces within a theater of operations can perform subordinate campaigns and major operations. Operational forces plan, conduct, and sustain to accomplish the strategic objectives of the unified commander or higher

military authority. The operational level is the link between national and theater strategic aims and the tactical employment of forces on the battlefield. In the United States Army, armies normally design the major ground operations of a subordinate campaign, while corps and divisions fight tactical battles and engagements.¹³

At the tactical level of war, battles and engagements are planned and conducted to accomplish military objectives assigned to tactical units or task forces. The victories, put together, achieve operational results. Tactics is the art and science of using available means to win battles and engagements. A battle consists of a series of related engagements. Engagements are small conflicts or skirmishes.¹⁴

This thesis organizes the material into five chapters. This chapter (Chapter 1) is the introduction. Its main purpose is to state the thesis research question and to give a brief background of the question. In addition, it covers the following subjects: limitations and scope of this paper, research method, definition of the levels of war, organization of this thesis, and significance of this study.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review. This chapter will briefly evaluate available materials on the Battle of Kursk. It will attempt to state selected authors' main points concerning the Battle of Kursk.

Chapter 3 discusses the Soviet-German strategic situation prior to the Battle of Kursk. It discusses the strategic results of the 1941 and 1942 German summer offensives against the Soviet Union, the changes in German and Soviet tactics, and the significance of the German defeats in the winter of 1942-1943. These discussions set the stage for the

Battle of Kursk. Chapters 3 and 4 answer the thesis primary question and provide conclusions and lessons learned.

Chapter 4 discusses the Battle of Kursk. It starts by briefly discussing the military situation in the spring of 1943. It then discusses how Hitler made the decision to attack and how the Soviets developed their own offensive and defensive plans for the summer of 1943. Since the Germans expected decisive results from their new tank technology, the next section in this chapter discusses the status of Germany's new tanks and war production. The paper then discusses Soviet intelligence, which was critical to the Soviet success at Kursk. The chapter then discusses both sides preparations prior to the battle, then the Battle of Kursk, and finally the Soviet counteroffensives immediately after Hitler canceled Operation "Citadel."

Chapter 5 discusses the results of the Battle of Kursk, German and Soviet tactical doctrine in the summer of 1943, implications of the Battle of Kursk on today's army operations, and conclusions. The purpose of the conclusions is to answer the thesis' primary question.

Although Operation "Citadel" occurred more than 50 years ago, it still has many useful lessons that are applicable to today's army operations. The Battle of Kursk was the greatest tank battle of World War II. Many of its lessons are still valid for today's conduct of armored and mechanized operations. A thorough study of this battle can help the military student better understand the concepts outlined in the United States Army doctrinal manual, FM 100-5, Operations. "Citadel" is full of examples that demonstrate the correct application of current army doctrine.

Endnotes

¹James L. Stokesbury, A Short History of World War II (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1980), 152-153.

²Geoffrey Jukes, Stalingrad, The Turning Point (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), 6.

³Walter Gorlitz, "The Battle for Stalingrad 1942-3," Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View, ed. H. A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 251; and Friedrich Wilhelm von Mellenthin, Panzer Battles (New York: Ballantine Books, 1956), 225-226.

⁴Jukes, Stalingrad, 153.

⁵Earl F. Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, The German Defeat in the East (Washington, D.C.: United States Army Center Of Military History, 1987), 97.

⁶Erich von Manstein, Lost Victories (California: Presidio Press, 1994), 436.

⁷B. H. Lidell Hart, The German Generals Talk (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1979), 212.

⁸Heinz Guderian, Panzer Leader (New York: Ballantine Books, 1957), 250; Larry H. Addington The Patterns of War Since the Eighteenth Century (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 204; Harrison E. Salisbury, The Unknown War (New York: Bantam Books, 1978), 155; Burkhardt Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer 1933-1945, three vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 1969), 220; and Douglas Orgill, Las Fuerzas Acorazadas Alemanas (Madrid: Librería Editorial San Martín, 1974), 129.

⁹Salisbury, 159.

¹⁰Georgii Konstantinovich Zhukov, Marshal Zhukov's Greatest Battles (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 256.

¹¹U. S. Army, FM 100-5, Field Service Regulations—Operations (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 14 June 1993), 6-1.

¹²*Ibid.*, 6-1 and 6-2.

¹³*Ibid.*, 6-2.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 6-3.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize selected authors' point of view concerning the Battle of Kursk and to briefly evaluate existing materials. Materials for this thesis came from a wide variety of sources, authors, and points of view. These ranged from general World War II histories, to books concentrating on the Eastern Front theater, to specific books and articles about the Battle of Kursk. Other materials included dissertations, theses, and magazine articles that focus on the Battle of Kursk. These sources normally concentrate on one aspect of the battle. By their nature, they cover their area of interest in greater detail than general World War II histories.

Many figures, like amounts of equipment, casualties, forces involved, and even dates, vary from source to source. The figures used in this thesis are selected based on the best judgment of available information and an evaluation of the source in terms of its reliability.

This chapter will discuss Anglo-American sources first. All of them are secondary sources. Next the chapter discusses German and then Soviet sources. All of the German and Soviet sources mentioned in this review are primary sources.

Anglo-American Sources

Overall, Anglo-American sources consider that Stalingrad was the turning point and decisive battle of the Eastern Front in World War II. It is not uncommon to find World War II history books that devote entire chapters to Stalingrad, while barely mentioning Kursk. However, there are plenty of Anglo-American sources that provide ample information on Kursk.

The West Point Military History Series, edited by Thomas E. Griess (1989), is a series of military history books written for the United States Military Academy cadets. They are mainly written by military officers. They are a good source of general information on military history. The Second World War: Europe and the Mediterranean volume covers Kursk in only two pages. However, it provides good general information about Kursk. This book is a good starting point for anyone conducting research on Kursk. Its main conclusion is that Kursk was an absolute failure that senselessly sacrificed German armor. It was the last important German offensive against the Soviet Union. The book is objective and uses Soviet, German, American, and British sources, mostly books and articles. The Campaign Atlas to the Second World War, also edited by Griess, provides one of the most detailed and complete maps on the Kursk battle.¹

John Erickson (1983) has published several works on Soviet military affairs. He has been a lecturer on Soviet politics at the Government Department of the University of Manchester. He has also been a lecturer in Higher Defense studies and a Professor of Politics at the University of Edinburgh, in addition to being the Director of Defense

Studies. His book The Road to Berlin presents a complete description of the Battle of Kursk. Erickson discusses almost every aspect of the battle, to include the planning process, German and Soviet preparations, German losses, and the Soviet counteroffensives that followed "Citadel." He provides a good day-by-day description of the battle, on both the northern and southern sectors of the Kursk salient. Erickson uses all types of sources. Primary references include German military documents and the War Diary of the *Wehrmacht* High Command, and Soviet military and diplomatic documents and memoirs. He also uses wartime press materials, Soviet official histories, and Eastern European and Western sources. Erickson's drawback is that although his book uses extensive documentation, he tends to view events from a Soviet perspective. Erickson's opinion as to "Citadel's" decisiveness is not clear. He limits himself to quoting General Heinz Guderian, who said that the failure at Kursk was a decisive defeat.²

Earl F. Ziemke (1987) is a graduate from the University of Wisconsin, where he received a Ph.D. in history. Since 1967 he has been a history professor at the University of Georgia. He, along with Mrs. Magna E. Bauer, wrote one of the best books on the war between Germany and the Soviet Union, published by the United States Army Center of Military History. Due to an ongoing lack of significant Soviet documentary evidence, the book uses mostly German military records. Ziemke and Bauer use documents from the German Armed Forces High Command (OKW), Army High Command (OKH), and field commands like army groups, armies, and corps. Although the book uses mostly German sources, it is

one of the most objective sources available on the war. It presents both German and Soviet views.³

Ziemke provides one of the most complete narratives on the Battle of Kursk. He covers the events that led to it, tactics used, the battle itself, and the subsequent Soviet counteroffensives. To Ziemke "Citadel" proved that the German armies could no longer shake the effects of the winter defeats and then make a strong bid for victory.⁴

The military historian and reporter Douglas Orgill (1974) commanded a tank squadron in Italy during World War II. His book is a brief history of the German panzers. Like Griess, he only provides general information about Kursk, concentrating on the panzer force's performance. His book is a good starting point for anyone interested in gathering data on Kursk. Orgill looks at the war primarily from the German perspective, and he exalts the overall quality of the Panzer branch. He believes that when the Germans initiated Operation "Citadel," it was to improve Germany's bargaining position at a negotiated peace settlement. Its goal was not to win the war; it was already too late for that.⁵

Harrison E. Salisbury has spent most of his life studying and writing about Russia. He went to Moscow as a war correspondent in 1944. He has won the Pulitzer Prize. In his book Salisbury wrote about many aspects from the Battle of Kursk, to include Soviet and German intentions and plans, status of forces involved, and Soviet defensive preparations. The majority of his writing on Kursk concentrates primarily on the Soviet side, particularly Marshals Georgii Zhukov's and Alexander Vasilevsky's roles before and during the battle. A high proportion of what Salisbury

wrote comes from Marshal Zhukov's memoirs. Although Salisbury concentrates on the Soviet side, his book is not biased. Salisbury thought that Stalingrad decided the war. However, he also believed that after Kursk no one could doubt the final outcome of the war on the Eastern Front. After Kursk, Germany would never again threaten the Soviets. Kursk became the final major German offensive against the Soviets.⁶

Two English authors who consider the results of "Citadel" decisive are J. F. C. Fuller (1949) and A. J. P. Taylor (1975). Major General J. F. C. Fuller's intentions when he wrote his book were not to write a complete history of the war, but to concentrate on its strategical and tactical history. He addressed Germany's political situation prior to "Citadel," and gave his views on why Hitler decided to attack the Kursk salient. He covered the battle, as well as the subsequent Soviet counterattacks, in very general terms. The book does not provide enough information about Kursk to even serve as a good starting point as part of a research. However, Fuller was one of the few western authors who believed that at Kursk the Germans suffered a decisive defeat. German tank losses were so high that Hitler could no longer conduct a defensive strategy, which depended on powerful mobile forces for its execution. Fuller believed that the defeat at Kursk was as disastrous to the Germans as had been their defeat at Stalingrad.⁷

Taylor taught modern history at Magdalen College, Oxford. During World War II he gave monthly commentaries in Oxford and other towns in England, evaluating the events of the previous month. Sometimes he would also speculate about what would happen next. Taylor's book

provides less than two pages of information about Kursk. He was, however, one of the few Anglo-American authors who believed that Kursk was the decisive battle of World War II, not Stalingrad. After Kursk Germany went on the defensive, never again to launch offensive operations against the Soviets. Delay, not victory, became Hitler's purpose and only hope. Taylor's book is a general World War II history book, which exalts the Soviet performance during the war. Its biggest drawback is that it heavily views events from the Soviet perspective. This book is not a very reliable source.⁸

German Sources

Overall, German sources assign a higher importance to the results of the Battle of Kursk than do most Anglo-American sources. There is also a tendency to justify many German defeats by blaming them on Soviet numerical superiority and on Hitler's interference with military operations. This section will discuss six German references, all of them primary sources.

The Fatal Decisions (1956) is a collection of articles about decisive battles of World War II. It includes the Battles of Britain, Moscow, El Alamein, Stalingrad, and 1944 France. A German general wrote each article. There is no article on Kursk. However, Siegfried Westphal, in a commentary called "Between the Acts," briefly talked about Kursk. Lieutenant General Westphal had been Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief West from 1944 to 1945. He said that after the defeat at Stalingrad and Tunisia Hitler was determined to win a new victory. This led him to launch Operation "Citadel." To Westphal "Citadel" caused

so many tank losses in the Panzer forces that they never recovered from it. Westphal's contribution to this paper is not what he writes about Kursk but how he ties Kursk with the other war theaters. This helps in providing a complete picture of the German military situation during the summer of 1943 and puts Kursk in the proper perspective. A reader can better understand how other theaters influenced developments during "Citadel."⁹

F. W. von Mellenthin (1956) was a German General Staff officer, who took part in some of the major campaigns in Africa, the Soviet Union, and France. His book basically covers only the campaigns in which he took part. During the Battle of Kursk he was the Chief of Staff of the 48th Panzer Corps, which belonged to the 4th Panzer Army. Von Mellenthin's book discusses several aspects from "Citadel" to include German plans, the effects of other theaters on German military operations on the Eastern Front, and armored tactics. His discussion of the battle centers around the 48th Panzer Corps. He provides a good day-by-day description of the battle in the 48th Panzer Corps sector. His description includes the main actions from each of the 48th Panzer Corps divisions. Von Mellenthin's book can be considered objective. To him "Citadel" was a very important battle, but like most Anglo-American writers, he believed that Stalingrad was the decisive battle on the Eastern Front. He wrote that the end result of "Citadel" was that the Panzer divisions suffered losses from which they could no longer recover. As a result, the strategic initiative passed to the Soviets.¹⁰

Heinz Guderian, Albert Speer, and Walther Warlimont believed that the results of "Citadel" were decisive. Erich von Manstein did not

explicitly say that Kursk was the decisive battle, but it can be implied by his comments.

Throughout 1943 Erich von Manstein (1955) commanded Army Group South. Many authorities consider him the best German commander of World War II. Von Manstein's book covers several aspects of "Citadel," to include Germany's strategic options prior to it and how and why Hitler decided to attack. His description of the battle is brief. Von Manstein also wrote about the Soviet counteroffensive against his army group that immediately followed "Citadel." He believed that when Hitler canceled "Citadel" the initiative on the Eastern Front finally passed to the Soviets. The Soviet preponderance in numbers was about to make itself felt. From that moment on, von Manstein's army group found itself waging a defensive struggle. He wrote that the essence of that struggle became to maintain his army group in the field, while trying to wear down the Soviet offensive capability. Although at times von Manstein tends to blame German defeats on Soviet numerical superiority or Hitler's interference with military operations, his book is overall an objective and reliable source.¹¹

Heinz Guderian (1957) wrote a book on the employment of German armor during World War II. Guderian was one of the primary developers of the German Panzer forces. When the Germans launched "Citadel," he was the Inspector General of Armored Forces. Guderian was present at most of "Citadel's" planning conferences. His book discusses primarily his version of what happened at them. He then covers the Battle of Kursk in only one page. Guderian thought Kursk was inadequately planned and carried out, and it was a decisive defeat. He was always against

executing the operation. In his opinion, Germany would incur losses that she would not be able to replace. The drawback to this book is that Guderian tends to always blame somebody else for Germany's misfortunes. He never did anything wrong. His objectivity, therefore, can at times become questionable.¹²

In 1943 Albert Speer (1970) was the German Minister of Armaments. His book is a good source of information on the status of German war production by 1943. From the moment he took over as Armaments Minister in February 1942, war production in Germany began to rise. Speer believed that after Stalingrad increased production allowed the Germans to narrow the gap on the Eastern Front. The delivery of new tanks encouraged Hitler to prepare a new offensive ("Citadel"). To Speer Kursk was important because its failure was a sign that even in the summer the initiative belonged to the Soviets. Even Hitler, in a sense, had to admit that fact. After Stalingrad the Army High Command proposed the establishment of a defensive position far to the rear, but Hitler refused to consider it. After Kursk even Hitler was ready to prepare defensive positions 12 to 15 miles behind the main line of battle.¹³

Walter Warlimont (1964) talked about Kursk in very general terms. From 1939 to 1944 he was the Deputy Chief of the Operations Staff in the High Command of the Armed Forces. Warlimont was primarily concerned with "Citadel's" effect on Germany's ability to successfully defend against an expected Allied attack on the Mediterranean. He noted that "Citadel" handed the Soviets the initiative and the Germans never recovered it. He added that after the failure at Kursk, the most the Germans could hope for was to stabilize the situation.¹⁴

Soviet Sources

Contrary to most Anglo-American sources, many Soviet sources consider that it was not a single battle that decided the outcome of the war on the Eastern Front, but a combination of battles. To many Soviets Germany was defeated by the combined results of the Battles of Moscow, Stalingrad, and Kursk. All three battles were important in determining the final outcome of the war. The Soviets study all three battles. They give Kursk a much greater emphasis than most Anglo-American World War II histories. This section will discuss Marshal Georgii Zhukov's memoirs and comment on the Soviet Military Review magazine.

In his memoirs Marshal Georgii Zhukov (1969) gave a detailed account of his participation at the Battle of Kursk. At that time he was Stalin's deputy for military affairs. Zhukov became the Soviet Union's most successful commander of World War II. He, along with Marshal Alexander Vasilevsky, planned the defense and subsequent counterattacks executed by the Soviets during the Battle of Kursk. Zhukov's book discusses the situation prior to the battle, the Soviet planning and preparations preceding the battle, the battle, and the Soviet counterattacks. The battle account mainly describes the events on the Central Front, which was the Soviet army group defending the northern part of the Kursk salient. To Zhukov, Kursk was one of the largest and most decisive events of World War II. The result was that the Soviets gained the strategic initiative for the remainder of the war. Like many Soviet sources, Zhukov's memoirs sometimes combine history with praise to the Soviet communist system. This is, however, a minor fault. Overall

the book is a good source for anyone interested in conducting research on how the Soviets planned, prepared, and fought at Kursk.¹⁵

The July and August 1983 editions of the Soviet Military Review had several articles written by Soviet marshals and generals who fought in the Battle of Kursk. To them the battle was another great Soviet victory of the Great Patriotic War. Each article covered a different aspect of "Citadel." They are a good source for facts concerning the performance of individual Soviet armies and corps and of different Soviet commanders. A reader who wants to use a Soviet Military Review article as a reference, however, must evaluate it thoroughly. Many articles provide historical facts mixed with praise for the Communist Party and the Soviet socialist system. Some articles imply that the Soviets won the war against Germany as a result of the superiority of the Socialist system. In that sense, each article could be both history and propaganda.

Conclusions

There are plenty of resources available to researchers wishing to make an in-depth study of the Battle of Kursk. This literature review only discusses the point of view of a few selected sources. Anyone aspiring to make a serious study on Kursk and its results should use Soviet, German, and Anglo-American sources. Only by using a wide variety of sources can a researcher reach a balanced and unbiased view.

Endnotes

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¹⁴Walter Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters, 1939-45 (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), 333-334.

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CHAPTER 3
SOVIET-GERMAN STRATEGIC SITUATION PRIOR TO THE
BATTLE OF KURSK

Introduction

By 1943 the world had been at war for three years. The Axis nations of Germany, Japan, Italy, and several minor allies were fighting a coalition of Allied nations led by the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain. The Axis and Allied nations waged war in the Pacific, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, North Africa, and Europe.

During 1942 the course of the war shifted in favor of the Allies. The Allies had stopped the Axis advances at El Alamein in North Africa; Stalingrad in the Soviet Union; and the Coral Sea, Midway, New Guinea, and Guadalcanal in the Pacific. At the beginning of 1943, the Axis nations were on the defensive in all war theaters. However, the Allies were not close to victory yet. Germany occupied most of Western Europe and had troops deep inside the Soviet Union. Japan still controlled a vast Pacific empire.

The 1941 German Offensive Against
The Soviet Union

When the Battle of Kursk began, Germany and the Soviet Union had been at war for two years. In the summers of 1941 and 1942, Germany launched major offensives against the Soviet Union designed to destroy her and her ability to wage war. In these campaigns Germany achieved

many tactical victories; however, she failed to achieve her strategic objectives.

Hitler's declared aim for the invasion of the Soviet Union was the destruction of Bolshevism.¹ For the attack, the High Command of the German Armed Forces (OKW) ordered that operations would be carried out to destroy the mass of the Soviet Army near the border by using armored spearheads. They were to prevent the withdrawal of the remnants of the Soviet forces, still capable of offering any resistance, into the vast expanses of the country.² Hitler believed the campaign would only last five months.³

The Germans committed 144 Army and 5 Waffen-SS divisions to "Barbarossa." Nineteen of these were Panzer divisions. The Germans would have 3,206,000 men on the Eastern Front, about 3,500 tanks of all types, and some 2,700 airplanes.⁴

Soviet strength is difficult to estimate. The Soviet armed forces may have totaled up to five million men in 1941. Probably about 2.5 million were stationed in the five western military districts and about one million in the Far East, ready to defend against Japan. The Soviets had about 20,000 tanks, but many were obsolete. However, unknown to the Germans, the Soviets were producing a new tank, the T-34. In 1941 the T-34 was the best tank in the world. By the time of "Barbarossa," the Soviets had about 1,000 T-34 tanks.⁵ The Soviet Union had a numerical advantage over Germany in total men and equipment; however, its equipment was mostly obsolete. As a result of the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s, its units were not well trained.

The single greatest disadvantage for the Soviet Army was the lack of skilled officers. In 1937 Stalin began a purge of the officer corps so he could establish a more politically reliable military elite. Stalin eliminated about 75 percent of the senior Soviet officers. The purge replaced senior officers with younger men with little knowledge and experience in military matters and generated in the officer corps a fear of assuming responsibility.⁶ At the beginning of "Barbarossa," the Soviet Army was mostly ill equipped, ill trained, and ill led.⁷

The mere survival of the Red Army in 1941 was an accomplishment. However, the Soviet Army not only survived, but improved. Just as the T-34 replaced obsolete Soviet tanks, many more competent commanders, who learned as they fought, appeared at all echelons. The Soviet soldier was tough and showed his worth when he had a good fighting chance under good commanders. The Germans paid a heavy price for every advance they made.⁸

As the winter of 1941 approached, the handling of Soviet troops by their senior commanders improved, as the old Stalinist commanders were replaced by younger men with more technical and tactical knowledge of the military art.⁹ The Germans discovered that their Soviet opponents became better as the war progressed.

The Germans planned to defeat the Soviets using the same tactics that defeated Poland and France. Their tactical doctrine in 1941 centered on the *blitzkrieg*. The German based their *blitzkrieg* technique on delivering decisive blows. Its characteristics were penetration and avoidance of broad frontal engagements. The Germans sought to concentrate force at the most decisive point. The first objective of a

German offensive was to quickly destroy the main enemy force. The purpose was to produce a decision.¹⁰

The German *blitzkrieg* tactical doctrine emphasized the use of the encirclement. In the encirclement, the Germans first penetrated or outflanked the enemy's defenses. When conducting a penetration, the Germans preferred using infantry forces supported by engineers, artillery, and air attacks. They exploited penetrations with armored units. Once a penetration or flanking maneuver succeeded, the armored formations sought to encircle the enemy in between two pincers. Once the pincers closed, the Germans had to create two encirclement forces. One would move inward to hold and gradually reduce the surrounded units. The other would face outward, and block any efforts to relieve the surrounded units. To create these two encirclement forces, the Germans tried to give each panzer corps at least one motorized infantry divisions (if available) to follow and support the panzer divisions.¹¹

A German flaw, which would decrease the effectiveness of the *blitzkrieg* against the Soviet Union, was their inadequate logistics system. The German supply system was basically tied to the railroads and horse drawn transports. The railroads, however, were too clumsy to sustain mobile operations in the field. In order to conduct a successful *blitzkrieg* operation against the Soviets, Hitler needed a flexible logistics system which only the motor truck could provide. However, in 1941 Germany's motor industry was not sufficiently developed to be able to produce the required trucks (nor armored combat vehicles). As a result, the *Wehrmacht* was only partially motorized and its motor vehicles were concentrated only among a small number of units.¹² As the German

Army moved deeper into the Soviet Union, its inadequate logistics system became a major problem. It proved incapable of supplying the needs of the Panzer and infantry units, and played a major role in the German defeat in front of Moscow.

Another German shortfall was that they never had enough strength in a Panzer corps to completely seal off encircled Soviet forces. The process of holding and reducing encirclements had to wait for the arrival of the infantry divisions. This allowed many Soviet soldiers and small units to escape the encirclement. It also prevented Panzer units from conducting further exploitation, as they had to wait for the foot infantry to arrive before conducting further attacks. Only when the infantry and logistic units caught up with the Panzer divisions, could they conduct further attacks.¹³

The German invasion started on 22 June 1941. The Germans attacked across the entire front from the Baltic to the Carpathians in three army groups. Army Group North advanced towards Leningrad. Army Group Center moved towards Smolensk and Army Group South towards Kiev.¹⁴ (See map at Figure 1.)

The Germans achieved many tactical victories between June and November 1941. At Minsk they captured 250,000 Russians and another 250,000 at Smolensk. At Kiev, in late September, the Germans surrounded a huge mass of Soviet soldiers, and took more than one-half million prisoners.¹⁵

However, by early August things started to go wrong for the Germans. The German lines were overstretched. The deficiencies of the German logistics system were starting to show. The logistics units that

were sustaining the attack, many of which depended on horse-drawn transports, were showing signs of wear and could not keep up with the German advance.¹⁶ It was proving incapable of sustaining the *blitzkrieg* in the vast spaces of the Soviet Union.

The German Army was largely dependent on horses for transport and logistics. Horse losses began to mount early in the campaign and there were insufficient replacements. By 31 July for example, the 44th Infantry Division operating in the Ukraine had lost 7 percent of its horses, even when counting replacements. The 21st Infantry Division noted on 7 August that they were using lighter horses for tasks normally performed by heavy draft horses, because replacements were not available.¹⁷ When the snow melted on the night of 6-7 October, it transformed the dirt roads into mud. Trucks and other wheeled vehicles sank up to their axles. The horses had to struggle forward over heavy ground in worsening weather. As a result horses became exhausted, and this became a serious problem. As an example, of the 1,072 horses treated by the 30th Infantry Division veterinary company between 16 September and 30 November, only 117 were wounded. The rest were suffering from exhaustion. By November German infantry divisions had only 65 percent of their horse-drawn transportation available.¹⁸ The inadequate German logistics system, in combination with the severe Russian winter and stubborn Soviet resistance, would be the main causes for the failure of Operation "Barbarossa."

German units also suffered heavy losses. Every step the Germans took in Russia cost them men and equipment.¹⁹ On 15 July General Walter Buhle, of the Organization Section of the General Staff, informed the

Chief of the General Staff, General Franz Halder, that among the armored forces only 50 percent of the tanks remained operational. The German Army in Russia had already suffered 230,000 dead, 690,000 wounded, and 14,000 missing by the end of November. The Germans had only 400,000 replacements available to make up these losses.²⁰ What was more significant was that losses were higher in the Panzer and first line infantry divisions.²¹ Losses were hurting the Germans where it mattered most. Their Panzer and infantry units were being sapped of their fighting strength. In addition, since Hitler expected a campaign that would last no more than five months, German troops were not equipped with adequate winter clothing. When the 1941 winter came, the Germans were completely unprepared. The combination of heavy losses and a bitter winter had the effect that by early December the Germans reached their culminating point.

After the Kiev envelopment, Hitler decided to advance towards Moscow, as the General Staff wanted. Operation "Typhoon," the drive for Moscow, started on 2 October. On 3 October the Germans reached Orel. Around the same time they also reached Bryansk and took about 50,000 prisoners. By 7 October the Germans had encircled some 45 Soviet divisions around Vyazma. Within a week they cleared the pocket and took 650,000 prisoners. However, on 7 October it began to rain. With the rain the unimproved Russian roads became morasses impassable to trucks. Even tracked vehicles had difficulties moving on these roads. By mid-October, after the Germans reached Kalinin and Kaluga, their advance became mired.²²

On 9 October 1941 Stalin appointed General Georgii Zhukov commander of the Western Front, with the mission of defending Moscow.²³ Zhukov would prove to be one of the best commanders of World War II.

In mid-November the Germans regrouped their forces, resupplied them as best as they could, and resumed their advance on Moscow. The 4th Panzer Group of Army Group Center was able to move just north of Moscow, but it was unable to encircle the city. German troops were too exhausted and ill supplied to conduct further maneuvers.²⁴ The 4th Panzer Group stopped its advance 25 miles from Moscow.²⁵ By then, the Soviets were beginning to absorb their first lessons on conducting combat operations against the Germans. Senior Soviet commanders were beginning to maneuver their troops much better than in June 1941.

Prior to 1941 Soviet tactical doctrine emphasized the preeminence of offensive operations. Soviet thought and resources focused on the creation of shock armies with mechanized and airborne units. These types of forces were all critical to achieving strategic offensive success through the use of deep operations. However, the Soviets neglected development of defensive techniques.²⁶

This general neglect of defensive techniques was one of the primary causes of the disasters of 1941. Understrength rifle divisions and brigades defended in extended sectors of 14 to 20 kilometers and were forced to deploy in single echelon. Small reserves, normally a battalion per division, provided little strength to conduct sustained counterattacks. Division defenses were subdivided into battalion defensive sectors and company strongpoints that were many times non-contiguous. Many sectors were not linked together by interlocking fire

and few gaps were covered with any type of direct or indirect fire. There was an almost complete lack of antitank defense and engineer obstacles. Through these gaps, German forces penetrated into the depth of the defense, disrupting the command and control of the division, and isolating units from each other.²⁷

Limited amounts of artillery denied rifle forces of adequate artillery support, and awkward use of tanks further damaged the integrity of the defense. Soviet commanders subdivided tank battalions and regiments into small groups and counterattacked from march formations without proper reconnaissance. These deficiencies, plus the lack of air cover, resulted in heavy tank losses.²⁸ The above deficiencies in Soviet tactical doctrine and practice proved to be a significant factor in the 1941 disasters. It facilitated the German Army task of encircling and destroying Soviet armies. A serious flaw was the Soviet use of tanks. By breaking up tank battalions and regiments into small groups the Soviets were violating the principle of concentration, basic to armored operations. Their piecemeal counterattacks allowed the Germans to defeat Soviet units in detail.

In October 1941 Soviet rifle divisions still operated in sectors of up to 24 kilometers. By November, however, as the Soviet Army strength grew, and as it began to learn how to concentrate, divisions narrowed their defensive sectors. They started to form in either one or two echelons made up of regiments.²⁹ A two echelon defense proved more effective in defending against a German attack. It allowed a Soviet commander to reinforce a sector, shift forces to meet a penetration, and

conduct counterattacks. This was one of the first lessons the Soviets learned in World War II. They would get better as the war progressed.

Soviet losses from June to December had been extremely high, about five to six million men, including three million prisoners of war.³⁰ However, their manpower seemed unlimited. They were able to raise new armies while the Germans could not. Already on 1 September 1941 Colonel-General Franz Halder, Army Chief of Staff, noted that the Replacement Army would be unable to provide further replacements until early 1942. The Soviets would have new divisions available to conduct their December 1941 counteroffensive. In contrast, the German divisions were tired, understrength, and without adequate winter clothing. They were worn-out, no longer the efficient divisions of June 1941.³¹

After the German advance on Moscow slowed down in mid-October, Zhukov's staff began planning a counteroffensive. Zhukov realized the Germans were reaching the limits of their offensive strength.³² Zhukov would have additional fresh forces from the Far East to conduct his counterattack. In the summer of 1941, Japan signed a nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union.³³ In early November, Stalin moved 15 Siberian divisions from the Far East to the Moscow front. These fresh divisions became available to participate in Zhukov's December counteroffensive.³⁴

On 6 December the Soviets opened their counterattack on the Moscow front. Within the next five weeks, the Germans retreated nearly 200 miles. For the first time since Hitler started the war in 1939, the Germans had suffered a major defeat on land.³⁵ The German armed forces had lost the illusion of invincibility. The plan to subjugate Russia within a period of three to five months was a failure. The Germans did

not take Moscow and the Russians were still fighting.³⁶ Leningrad, though under siege, was not taken.

By mid-December 1941 the total German casualties in Russia amounted to about 775,000 men. This was about one-quarter of the average German strength engaged in the Soviet Union during that year. The Germans were on the defensive everywhere in the Soviet Union, and Army Group Center was retreating from Moscow under heavy Soviet counterattacks. Despite victories at Minsk, Smolensk, Kiev, and Vyazma, Germany still had not defeated the Soviet Union.³⁷ Hitler failed to achieve all of his main objectives for "Barbarossa." The German Army would never recover from the 1941 campaign against the Soviet Union.³⁸ Never again would it be able to launch an offensive on the scale of "Barbarossa," across the entire Soviet front.

A final decisive event occurred on 7 December, when the Japanese fleet attacked the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor, which brought the United States into World War II.³⁹ On 11 December Hitler declared war on the United States. At a time when Germany's resources were already strained, Hitler had declared war on the world's foremost industrial power.⁴⁰ The two-front war that German planners had always feared was now a reality.

The 1942 German Offensive Against The Soviet Union

After the failure of the 1941 German offensive, the German Army no longer had the strength to attack along the entire Russian front, like in 1941. In 1942 Hitler concentrated on the southern sector, with the

aim of capturing the Caucasus' oil, which both Germans and Russians needed.⁴¹

After the losses of the 1941 campaign, the German Army in 1942 was weaker than in 1941.⁴² Army Groups South and A, which would conduct the attack on the Caucasus, received top priority for refitting with men and equipment. The Germans refitted all of their motorized divisions but only 12 infantry divisions. They partially refitted 16 additional infantry divisions. Due to shortages in men and equipment, Army Groups North and Center could not be refitted. The German General Staff ordered 69 of their 75 infantry divisions to disband three of their nine battalions. The combat strength of such a reorganized division would be about half the strength of a May 1941 division.⁴³ Army Groups North and South would remain on the defensive throughout 1942.

German tactical doctrine changed little for the 1942 campaign.⁴⁴ The Germans still retained their advantage in mobile tactics, but when they moved into the city of Stalingrad, they threw away that advantage.⁴⁵ Also, as the Soviets reorganized and retrained their armies, the Germans found it was becoming more difficult to achieve the same successes of 1939 to 1941.⁴⁶

By 1942, the German Army was declining both in overall training and tactical proficiency. The continuous and heavy casualties sustained by the old veterans, and the hasty training given to their replacements, were beginning to degrade the performance of the Panzer divisions by the autumn of 1942.⁴⁷ As the war progressed and the Germans continued to absorb heavier losses, the decline in training and tactical proficiency

accelerated. The Germans would find it harder to replace losses with properly trained replacements.

Soviet tactical doctrine for both offense and defense had changed considerably by 1942 and would continue to change. Increases in manpower and weapons continued to improve the Soviet tactical defenses of 1942. Rifle divisions more frequently created second echelons, tank and antitank reserves, and stronger artillery groups. Antitank defenses also improved with the creation of networks of antitank obstacles, which slowed down armor penetrations. These improvements in defensive tactics would prove very effective during the Battle of Stalingrad, which was the culmination of the 1942 campaign. Soviet defenses at Stalingrad forced the Germans to fight and suffer heavy casualties for every advance they made.⁴⁸

Soviet defensive tactics had improved by 1942, however, there were still some deficiencies that would not be corrected until 1943. Full use of defensive engineer preparations and the full development of antitank defenses would not occur until 1943. Throughout the winter of 1942-1943, divisional defenses still remained shallow, with normally only one defensive belt, still weak in antitank weapons.⁴⁹

Soviet offensive tactics also improved during 1942. These changes were critical to the success of the Soviet counteroffensive that encircled Stalingrad in November 1942. The most important change was the formation of shock groups, with the purpose of concentrating combat power on a narrow frontage to break through the German defenses. The Soviets ordered division and larger units to mass on narrow fronts. On 8 October Stalin also forbade the echelonment of infantry forces in the attack.

The Soviets attempted to mass as much combat power as possible by placing almost all the infantry in one echelon. The Soviets would also mass the tank units that were still assigned to support infantry assaults. These units would normally operate under their own commanders.⁵⁰

Having all the infantry forward in one echelon did not provide the flexibility afforded by two echelons. Two echelons allowed the attacker to shift resources to exploit success or to respond to unexpected enemy moves. The German defenses at Stalingrad, however, were stretched so thin that this forward massing of Soviet infantry was more important than echelonment to sustain the attack.⁵¹

The improvements in Soviet tactical doctrine in both offense and defense would not be evident until September and October of 1942. When the Germans began their 1942 summer offensive, they still had a qualitative advantage over the Soviets, especially in maneuver. Hitler would throw that away when he tried to capture Stalingrad.

The Soviets attacked first in 1942. On 12 May, Marshal Semen Konstantinovich Timoshenko's Southwestern Front launched an attack to the north of the Izyum salient designed to take Kharkov. General Ewald von Kleist's 1st Panzer Army counterattacked on 17 May and captured Izyum on 19 May. Von Kleist then broke through the southernmost Soviet army and made contact with the 6th German Army attacking from the north. This maneuver enveloped the southern arm of the Russian offensive, to include the Soviet 6th and 57th armies. The Germans took 214,000 prisoners. The defeat weakened and demoralized the Soviets.⁵²

On 7 June von Manstein's 11th Army began an assault on Sevastopol. It fell on 1 July. Finally, on 28 June the 1942 German

summer offensive began. (See map at Figure 2.) Initially, the Germans scored enormous successes. They made a swift breakthrough on the Kursk-Kharkov sector. Through it, von Kleist's 1st Panzer Army swept through along the corridor between the Don and Donetz Rivers.⁵³ It pursued the Soviets across the Caucasian plain and by 9 August reached the Maikop oil fields.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, General Hermann Hoth's 4th Panzer Army advanced 200 kilometers towards the Don River, defeating a badly planned Soviet counterattack, and took Voronezh on 3 July.⁵⁵

Hitler, impressed by the easy victories, split his effort between the Caucasus and Stalingrad on the Volga River. On 13 July he ordered Hoth to cross the lower Don River and advance towards Rostov, while von Kleist recrossed the Donetz River to advance on the same city. Hitler was sending both Panzer armies to attack towards the west, thus halting Army Group B's advance towards Stalingrad. Hitler had forfeited his chance to capture Stalingrad when the Soviet defenses were still weak.⁵⁶ He could have easily captured Stalingrad at this time. Instead, he gave the Soviets time to move two newly created armies, the 62nd and the 64th, to the area.⁵⁷

On 17 July Hitler redirected elements of the 4th Panzer Army towards the Don to assist the 6th Army in its drive to Stalingrad. Meanwhile, the Soviets had begun an orderly retreat, avoiding a large envelopment west of the Don River. On 23 July, Hitler gave Friedrich Paulus 6th Army the XXIV Panzer Corps from the 4th Panzer Army, and for the first time, a definite order to take Stalingrad. Due to inadequate supplies of gasoline and ammunition, Paulus could not start his attack

until 7 August, when he attacked the Russian bridgehead at Kalach, on the west bank of the Don River.⁵⁸

After their defeats west of the Don, the Soviets at Stalingrad were disorganized and dispirited, but on 10 September General Vasili Ivanovich Chuikov took command of the 62nd Army defending Stalingrad. He brought new vigor and optimism to his command. With their backs to the Volga River and with no place to retreat, Chuikov's men fought grimly against each new German 6th Army attack.⁵⁹

By mid-September the 6th Army occupied the center of Stalingrad and most of the old city in the south, but Paulus was very concerned about his flanks. By the end of September the LI Corps advanced into the Barricades Factory section and in October into the tractor factories in the northern sector of the city. In previous campaigns, the Germans had maneuvered hundreds of miles in a few weeks. At Stalingrad the 6th Army fought for weeks for a few hundred yards of ruins.⁶⁰

The battle reached its climax in mid-October, as Paulus attacked Chuikov south along the Volga River. Although by then Chuikov's army was split in half, his 62nd Army kept fighting for every building. By the end of October the Germans reached the Red October factory, where fighting continued for weeks. The 6th Army, however, was too exhausted to try another major assault. To the Germans, the battle ceased to have any strategic meaning. Stalingrad was simply a killing ground.⁶¹ It sucked-in more and more German troops, and kept causing heavy casualties which the Germans could not afford.

To the south near the foothills of the Caucasus, the 1st Panzer Army at the end of August reached Mozdok where Soviet resistance

stiffened. Mozdok fell on 15 August and the Soviets withdrew to Grozny; however, von Kleist could not advance towards that city. On 10 September the German 17th Army captured the naval Black Sea base of Novorossisk. Afterwards, due to difficult terrain, Soviet resistance, length of communications, and fuel shortages, the Caucasus campaign basically came to a halt.⁶² Hitler failed to get his first objective.

On 19 November at Stalingrad, the Soviets counterattacked the long German flank held by the Rumanian and Italian armies. By 23 November Paulus' 6th Army was encircled inside Stalingrad. Hitler did not allow the 6th Army to withdraw, and relieving attempts in December failed.⁶³

By the end of January 1943, the German 6th Army had been surrounded at Stalingrad for over two months. The end came on 31 January after the Soviets succeeded in cutting the German pocket in two. Friedrich Paulus, who Hitler had just promoted to Field Marshal, surrendered to the Soviets. On 2 February, the last remnants of the 6th Army surrendered. The Soviets encircled about 270,000 men at Stalingrad, a total of 20 German and 2 Rumanian divisions. About 90,000 survived to be captured by the Soviets.⁶⁴

The encirclement and surrender of the 6th Army forced von Kleist, whose left flank was now threatened by the Soviets, to evacuate the Caucasus. On 2 January 1943, he abandoned Mozdok and then fell back to the Tamask Peninsula, commanding the Strait of Kerch, and to a fortified area east of Rostov.⁶⁵

After achieving spectacular successes early in the 1942 summer offensive, the Germans in the end failed to achieve their objectives. Stalingrad, the 6th Army and the Caucasus were lost.

The Significance Of The German Defeats In The Winter Of 1942-43

The military results of the Soviet winter offensive between November 1942 and March 1943 were very impressive. The Soviets destroyed the German 6th Army and four other Axis armies. The Soviet count of damage inflicted on German forces ran to over 100 divisions: 68 German, 19 Rumanian, 10 Hungarian, and 10 Italian divisions were completely wrecked. The Italians lost over 185,000 men, the Hungarians some 140,000 and the Rumanians over 250,000 men. The Soviets claimed to have put over one million men out of action between November 1942 to March 1943.⁶⁶

Between August 1942 to February 1943, the Germans lost about 3,500 tanks and self-propelled guns, 12,000 guns and mortars, and 3,000 aircraft. The total equipment lost was enough to equip some 75 divisions.⁶⁷ Due to the heavy losses sustained by the Germans in the 1942 campaign, when they resumed offensive operations in the summer of 1943, they had to limit operations to a much narrower sector than in the previous campaigns. In 1941 Germany had the strength to attack across the entire Eastern Front. In 1942 the Germans could attack on only one sector of the front, the southern sector. By 1943 Germany no longer had the operational reserves to even launch an attack across an entire sector. The 1943 German offensive would be limited to a section of the southern front and had to use all available reserves.⁶⁸ As the war in

the east progressed, Germany was becoming weaker, the Soviet Union stronger.

The 1942 winter defeats also had political consequences for Germany. At the University of Munich, a group of students prepared and distributed leaflets calling for resistance to the government and the war. Although it was brutally suppressed, it showed that some cracks had begun to develop in the facade of German unity behind Hitler.⁶⁹

The strongest reactions to Germany's defeats came from her allies. In Italy Benito Mussolini was worried. On 12 May 1942 252,415 German and Italian troops (These losses were comparable to the German 6th Army losses at Stalingrad.) surrendered to the Anglo-Americans forces in Tunisia. Hitler and Mussolini had lost their last foothold in Africa. The whole Axis southern flank from the Pyrenees to the Aegean Sea was now open to Allied attacks.⁷⁰

The North African defeat had shaken Mussolini's regime and it was doubtful that he could survive an Allied invasion of Italy. In December, and again in March 1943, he proposed to Hitler that he negotiate peace with the Soviets to avoid a two front war. In the second week of April, Mussolini visited Hitler. By then Hitler had already rejected the idea of negotiating peace with Stalin, claiming that Stalin could not be trusted.⁷¹

After Mussolini, other Axis leaders visited Hitler. The list included the Rumanian head of state, Field Marshal Ion Antonescu, and the Regent of Hungary, Admiral Miklos Horthy. Antonescu, like Mussolini, was worried about fighting a two front war, but he recommended making peace with the Western Allies so the Axis could concentrate all strength

against the Soviets. Rumania, which shared a long border with the Soviet Union, had no choice but to stay in the war. The Hungarians, on the other hand, decided from here on to keep the majority of their army in Hungary. Finally, all hopes of bringing Turkey into the war on Germany's side were gone.⁷²

The end result of the 1942 German campaign, and the Soviet 1942-1943 winter counteroffensive, was that Germany became weaker both militarily and politically. Hitler failed to achieve any of his objectives. Germany sustained heavy losses that could no longer be replaced. Hitler's allies started to look for ways out of the alliance. Moscow in 1941 and Stalingrad in 1942 set the stage for a third major battle that in 1943 would finally destroy the remaining German offensive strength.

After Stalingrad, however, the Germans were still militarily dangerous. Germany was no longer capable of launching offensive operations on the scale of 1941 and 1942, but still could launch limited offensives with limited objectives, designed to inflict as many casualties as possible. Von Manstein believed that a strategy like this still had the potential of forcing the Soviets to accept a stalemate.⁷³ The question was whether Hitler understood that Germany could, at the most, conduct only limited offensives. In the end, he felt that he needed a decisive victory to restore morale, and to demonstrate to the Allies that Germany was still strong. In 1943 Hitler would try to attain this victory at Kursk.

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CHAPTER 4

THE BATTLE OF KURSK

In July 1943 Germany and the Soviet Union fought the greatest tank battle of World War II in the Kursk salient. In this battle Hitler attempted to regain the strategic initiative on the Eastern front. The Soviets anticipated the time and place of the attack. Therefore they were able to use their defenses in depth, and their numerical superiority in tanks, guns, airplanes, and men to win the battle and take over the initiative on the Eastern Front. They would never lose it again.

Spring, 1943

After the 6th Army surrender, the Soviets continued their offensive. (See map at Figure 3.) On 15 January they launched an offensive to the south of Voronezh. On 7 February they took Kursk and on 9 February Belgorod. On February 16 they drove the Germans from Kharkov. In early March the German Army Group Center evacuated the Rzhev and Vyazma salient.¹

Russian supply lines, however, became over-stretched after pushing the Germans west more than 150 miles. Army Group South forces under Field Marshal von Manstein counterattacked in the area of Kharkov, halting the Russian advance and throwing them back. (See map at Figure 4.) On 28 February von Manstein ordered an attack on Kharkov parallel to

the Donetz River. On 14 March Kharkov fell to the SS Panzer Corps. At the same time, the *Grossdeutschland* Division captured Belgorod.²

On 21 March von Manstein proposed crossing the Donetz River so he could gain a front line that did not have to follow the bends of the Donetz to the south of Kharkov. General Hermann Hoth, Commander of the 4th Panzer Army, disagreed. He said the troops were worn out and that the defensive advantages of the river outweighed gaining a shorter line in the open steppe. Von Manstein then declared the Kharkov operation completed as of 17 March. South of Belgorod, Army Group South stood along approximately the same line from which the Germans launched their 1942 summer offensive. At the end of March the spring thaw halted active operations.³ It was time for the commanders on each side to look at the situation and plan for future operations.

The dominant feature on the Eastern Front in the spring of 1943 was the Kursk salient, that ran from just north of Kharkov and Belgorod, to the south of Orel. (See map at Figure 5.) North of Belgorod, the front swung sharply to the west, 150 miles into German-held territory. The bulge was 175 miles wide, curving sharply back to the east near a small town called Dmitrovsk-Orlovsky, southwest of Orel. The manufacturing city of Kursk stood more or less in the center of this bulge.⁴

This huge salient, about half the size of England, presented both dangers and opportunities. The Soviets were positioned so they could attack the Germans to the north or to the south from inside the salient. The Germans had troops to the north and south of the salient, which meant they could threaten Soviet forces inside the salient from two

directions.⁵ The key decision became who would attack first, or who could resist that temptation, preferring instead to wait for the enemy to attack, and after the enemy had been attrited by the defense, counterattack.

Hitler Makes the Decision to Attack.

In March 1943 Marshal Georgii Zhukov served as Stalin's deputy for military affairs. Zhukov did not believe Hitler had sufficient forces to launch a major offensive towards the Volga River or the Caucasus Mountains. He was sure, however, that because of political and military strategic considerations, the Germans would try to hold the front from the Gulf of Finland to the Sea of Azov and launch a major offensive against the Kursk salient.⁶

On the German side, the situation was seen just as Zhukov imagined. Von Manstein had hoped to attack the Kursk salient in March, soon after taking Kharkov, but was stopped by the Red Army defenses and the spring mud.⁷

General Kurt Zeitzler, Chief of the Army General Staff, proposed launching an offensive during the summer of 1943. He visualized a double envelopment against the Kursk salient. German troops would attack south from the Orel area and north from the Belgorod area. They would meet behind Kursk, encircling all Soviet troops inside the salient. If successful, this operation would destroy a large number of Red Army divisions, weaken its offensive strength, and place the German High Command in a more favorable position for continuing the war.⁸

The Germans would also have new weapons available. The first was the 60 ton Mark VI Tiger tank, with its 88mm main gun. The other new weapon was the Mark V Panther tank. They also had 90 Ferdinand self-propelled guns. Albert Speer, Germany's Minister for Armaments, promised that 324 Panthers would be delivered by 31 May.⁹ Zeitzler expected decisive successes from the Panther and Tiger tanks. He believed that by using them in his proposed offensive, the Germans could regain the initiative.¹⁰

Zeitzler expected decisive results from new technology, however, that had not been thoroughly tested yet. In July 1943 the Panther was still not ready for combat. The Ferdinand was a very slow self-propelled gun which could not defend itself against infantry due to its lack of machine guns. The Tiger I was too heavy and slow to be as effective in offensive operations as the Soviet T-34 tank. It also had frequent mechanical breakdowns.¹¹

On 13 March 1943 Hitler issued Operations Order No. 5, designed to hit the Soviet armies inside the Kursk salient in April before they could be replenished.¹² In March the fronts of Army Groups Center and South remained fluid. Army Group Center was conducting Operation "Bueffel." This was a large scale withdrawal designed to shorten its front. It also prevented the Soviets from encircling the 4th and 9th Armies. The 2nd Army and the 2nd Panzer Army were still trying to stop the Soviets in the bulge west and northwest of Kursk. The 4th Panzer Army of Army Group South was concluding the Kharkov operation. It had been on the move without a pause for nearly a month and its units were exhausted. Both army groups needed time to rest and refit. To get ready

for the Kursk operation by mid April would be difficult, if not impossible.¹³

On 15 April Hitler issued Operations Order 6, directing that the attack on Kursk would start within six days after 28 April. The 9th Army, which was to launch the attack in the Army Group Center zone, protested, saying that its deployment could not be completed in time. It insisted that either its mission be reduced, or the operation be postponed until 15 May.¹⁴

On the morning of 30 April, the High Command of the German Army (OKH) postponed the Kursk operation for four days due to heavy rains. In the afternoon OKH ordered that all directives setting a time for the operation be canceled and destroyed. A new date would not be set until Hitler had conferred with the commanding generals.¹⁵ Hitler may have been worried about information the commander of the 9th Army gave him, which indicated the Soviets were expecting the attack and had taken measures to defeat it.¹⁶

On 3 and 4 May Hitler held a conference in Munich. Its purpose was to discuss whether Army Groups Center and South would be in position to launch offensive operations in the coming summer. Those present included Zeitzler, the commanders of Army Group South, General Erich von Manstein, and Center, Field Marshal Guenther von Kluge, the commander of the 9th Army, Field Marshal Walther Model, the Minister of Production, Albert Speer, and the Inspector General of Armored Troops, General Heinz Guderian.¹⁷

Hitler opened the conference by describing the situation on the Eastern Front, then outlined Zeitzler's proposals and the arguments that

Model had against them. Model had information, based largely on air photographs, that showed the Soviets were preparing deep and very strong defensive positions in the same places where Zeitzler proposed the attack. The Soviets had already withdrawn the mass of their mobile formations from the Kursk salient. They had reinforced likely German approaches with very strong artillery and antitank forces. Model concluded the Soviets were expecting this attack.¹⁸

Model also believed that his Mark IV tanks would be unable to withstand the new Soviet antitank weapons. He wanted to postpone the offensive so he could accumulate more tanks, especially the new models. Hitler asked von Manstein for his opinion. Von Manstein said the attack could have been successful in April, but now it was doubtful, and he would need two additional full strength infantry divisions. Hitler said these were not available, repeated the question, and received an ambiguous reply.¹⁹

After the war Guderian alleged that von Kluge was in favor of the plan.²⁰ However, he was against postponing the attack. Von Kluge, as well as von Manstein, believed any more delays would benefit the Soviets more than the Germans. A delay would give the Soviets time to recover and refit from the winter battles, move more reinforcements into the area, and prepare more defenses.²¹

Guderian said the attack was pointless. He said the Germans had just completed the reorganization and reequipping of the Eastern Front. If they attacked, they were going to suffer heavy tank losses, which could not be replaced in 1943. Guderian also pointed out that the new Panthers, whose performance Zeitzler believed would be decisive, were

still suffering from mechanical problems inherent to all new equipment. It was unlikely these could be solved prior to the attack. Albert Speer supported Guderian from the point of view of arms production.²²

Guderian alleged that he and Speer were the only ones to speak clearly against Zeitzler's plan. Still, Hitler was not completely convinced by all the arguments in its favor.²³ He closed the conference without making a decision, but indicated to Model that there would be a postponement.²⁴ Hitler was still full of doubts about this attack and had been impressed by the comments made by Model, Guderian, and Speer.

Hitler was in Berlin on 10 May and he summoned Guderian to a conference in the chancellery to discuss Panther production. At the end of the conference, Guderian grabbed Hitler by the hand and asked if he was allowed to speak frankly to him. Hitler said he was. Guderian urged Hitler to give up the attack. Guderian could already see the difficulties confronting them, the great commitment would not bring equivalent gains and the defensive preparations in the West would suffer. Guderian then asked: "My Fuehrer, why do you want to attack in the East at all this year?"²⁵

Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel intervened: "We must attack for political reasons."²⁶

Guderian answered: "How many people do you think even know where Kursk is? It's a matter of profound indifference to the world whether we hold Kursk or not. I repeat my question: Why do we want to attack in the East at all this year?"²⁷

Hitler replied: "You are quite right. Whenever I think of this attack, my stomach turns over."²⁸

Guderian answered: "In that case your reaction to the problem is the correct one. Leave it alone"! Hitler assured Guderian that he was not committed to the operation yet, and with that, the conversation ended.²⁹

On 6 May the OKH announced that the attack on Kursk was postponed until 12 June.³⁰ This was against the advice of Manstein and Kluge. Hitler hoped that in June his armored divisions would be stronger after being supplied with new tanks. He did not change this decision even after von Manstein pointed out the effects of the recent unfavorable developments in Tunisia. These developments could mean that, if the Kursk operation was delayed any longer, there would be a danger that it could coincide with an Allied landing on the continent. Also, the longer the Germans waited, the more armor the Soviets would have.³¹

As a result of delays in the delivery of new tanks, the attack on Kursk did not begin until July. To von Manstein, this meant that any advantages the Germans might have had in attacking Kursk were gone. The whole idea was to attack before the Soviets replenished their forces and prepared their defenses. By July the Soviets were ready.³² The more Hitler postponed his attack, the more his prospects for victory diminished.

The longer Hitler put off the date of the attack, the higher the probability that it would also coincide with a new Allied offensive in the Mediterranean. Therefore, on 18 June the High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW) Operations Staff proposed to Hitler that until the situation was clarified, Hitler should cancel the attack on Kursk. Additionally, Germany should form a strong operational reserve, at the disposal of the

supreme command, on the Eastern front and in Germany. The reserve in Germany would consist of new units.³³

On that same day Hitler decided that although he acknowledged the point of view of the OKW, the Kursk operation should be carried out. Hitler set the date for 3 July, but later changed it to 5 July. Finally, before the end of the day Hitler approved the final form of Operation "Citadel," the code name for the attack on Kursk.³⁴

In the three months after Hitler first issued Operations Order No. 5, the situation at the front had changed so much that Operation "Citadel" would be fought under conditions opposite to those originally anticipated. The time for exploiting the Soviet's temporary weakness was gone. The Germans would attack through a fortified zone many miles deep and backed up by plenty of reserves.³⁵

In spite of advice from senior military leaders that Operation "Citadel" be canceled, and in spite of his own doubts, Hitler decided to carry out the attack. Most probably he felt Germany needed a major military victory to raise sagging morale, both at the home front and at the front.

Politically, Hitler also needed a victory that would raise the morale of his allies in Italy, Rumania, and Hungary. The reactions of Mussolini, Antonescu, and Horthy to the defeats in the winter of 1942-43 probably had Hitler worried about their continued commitment to his cause. A victory at Kursk would raise their morale and keep them fighting on Germany's side. A German victory at Kursk would also demonstrate to the world that Germany was still strong. Hitler himself stated that the victory at Kursk would have the effect of a beacon seen

around the world.³⁶ Finally, a new German victory would restore the German people's faith in their *Führer*, which had gone down after Stalingrad and the winter defeats.

Russian Plans

On the Soviet side, defensive plans had been in gestation since the middle of March. On 13-14 March Zhukov flew to Moscow to confer with Stalin about the situation in Kharkov. The Germans were about to recapture the city. The Germans took the city on 16 March, but were stopped soon after that. In the interval, in late March and early April Zhukov visited units on the Voronezh Front. When he went back to Moscow, preliminary planning for Kursk began.³⁷

By early April Zhukov had almost full information on enemy forces near Orel, Suny, Belgorod, and Kharkov. After discussing intelligence with the commanders of the Voronezh Front, Lieutenant General N. F. Vatutin, and the Central Front, General Konstantin Rokossovsky, and with Marshal Alexander Vasilevsky, Chief of the General Staff, he sent Stalin a report on 8 April. Zhukov stated that the Germans had suffered heavy losses during the winter of 1942-1943, so they would not be able to gather enough strength to renew their advance to the Caucasus. Since the Germans lacked reserves, they would have to limit their 1943 summer offensive to a narrower front. Given the German dispositions in front of the Soviet Central and Voronezh fronts, Zhukov believed the Germans would attack in that area.³⁸

Zhukov said that opposite the Central and Voronezh fronts the Germans had up to twelve tank divisions. By moving three to four

additional tank divisions from other sectors, the Germans could throw as many as 15 or 16 tank divisions against Kursk.³⁹

Zhukov recommended the strengthening of the antitank defenses of the Voronezh and Central fronts. This included assembling 30 antitank artillery regiments into the Supreme Headquarters reserves, placing some of the regiments at the disposal of Rokossovsky and Vatutin, and concentrating as much air strength as possible in the Supreme Headquarters reserve. Zhukov also recommended concentrating operational reserves around Yelets and Voronezh. Finally, he cautioned against launching preventive attacks. He said it would be better to wear down the Germans with the defenses. In the process, the Soviets would destroy as many of German tanks as possible. Then, after moving up fresh reserves, the Soviets would go over to the offensive.⁴⁰

In April 1943 neither the Germans nor the Soviets had the initiative. After Stalingrad the Soviets had it, to lose it when the Germans recaptured Kharkov. The Germans in turn lost the initiative when they were forced to halt operations after capturing Kharkov. The Germans regained it when Zhukov decided to let them attack first at Kursk, while the Soviets defended. Germany temporarily regained the initiative because they were the ones selecting when and where to attack. However, Zhukov's proposed counterattacks were designed to stop the German attacks and regain the initiative, never to lose it again.

On 10 April Stalin received a report from General M. S. Malinin, Chief of Staff of the Central Front, which agreed with Zhukov's evaluation. He believed that offensives on other sectors were unlikely and that they could expect the offensive in the second half of May. On

12 April a report from Lieutenant General N. F. Vatutin and Nikita Khrushchev, the Voronezh Front Political Officer, also concurred with Zhukov.⁴¹

Formal planning for Kursk began on 12 April in Moscow. On 10 April Stalin told Zhukov to return to Moscow to discuss plans for the spring and summer campaign of 1943. Zhukov arrived in Moscow on the evening of 11 April. There, Vasilevsky told him that Stalin wanted a situation map and recommendations by the following evening.⁴²

All day on 12 April Zhukov, Vasilevsky, and General A. I. Antonov, Vasilevsky's deputy, worked on the materials for the conference. They agreed Germany was capable of launching a major offensive in only one strategic sector. The greatest threat seemed to be the Kursk salient, where the Germans could attack from two directions: south from the Orel area, and north from the Belgorod area. The German objective would be to destroy the Soviet troops of the Central and Voronezh Fronts. That would change the strategic situation in the German favor. The elimination of the salient would straighten the front and increase the operational density of the German lines.⁴³ They met with Stalin that evening. He agreed that the main German striking forces were concentrated around the Kursk salient, but still expressed concern about Moscow. However, by the end of the conference he agreed to give priority to the construction of the Kursk defenses.⁴⁴

Zhukov, Vasilevsky and Antonov decided to construct a defense in depth in the Kursk salient. Troops were to dig in deeply. Supreme Headquarters reserves in the process of being formed were not to be moved

to the front. They would be held in the newly created Steppe Front, for use in a summer offensive.⁴⁵

Supreme Headquarters regarded the Voronezh, Central, Southwest, and Bryansk Fronts as the principle sectors in the first stages of the coming campaign. The Soviets planned to meet the expected German offensive with a powerful defense, wear down the Germans, and then counterattack. Zhukov resolved to assemble the Supreme Headquarters reserves at Litny, Stary Oskol, and Korocha. Reserves would mass in this area, ready to form a new defensive line in case the Germans broke through the Kursk salient.⁴⁶

In preparation for the battle the Soviets reorganized command structures and refitted their armies. They equipped their units with new weapons, in particular, tanks and armored vehicles and they mechanized some divisions with American trucks, jeeps, and command vehicles. Instead of horses, they issued trucks for transportation to their infantry divisions.⁴⁷

The Soviets began to equip their Air Force with improved airplanes like the LA-5 and YAK-9. They formed new units, including eight bomber corps, which were part of Supreme Headquarters reserves. The Soviet Air Force now outnumbered the *Luftwaffe* (German Air Force) on the Eastern Front. Each Soviet front command had its own air army of 700 to 800 planes.⁴⁸ Overall command of the air now belonged to the Soviets. German armored formations now had to defend themselves not only from the Soviet ground troops, but from increasing Soviet air attacks, with airplanes that were as good, if not better, than those of the Germans.

By early May the Soviet general staff completed its basic plan for the 1943 spring and summer campaign. Around the middle of May, General Vatutin proposed launching a preventive strike against the German Belgorod-Kharkov grouping. Vasilevsky, Antonov and Zhukov informed Stalin that they did not support this idea. Stalin had doubts about whether to wait for the German offensive or to strike a preemptive blow. He was afraid that Soviet defenses might not be able to withstand the German offensive, like in 1941 and 1942. After many discussions with Zhukov, Stalin finally decided to wait for the German attack and meet it with artillery, air strikes, and counterattacks by operational and strategic reserves. Once the Germans were worn down, the Soviets would launch their own counteroffensive in the Belgorod-Kharkov and Orel areas.⁴⁹

In an effort to stop a massed German tank strike, the Soviets deployed their antitank weapons in great depth, with a maximum of artillery, tanks, mines, and engineer obstacles in the Central and Voronezh fronts. In the 13th Army sector of the Central Front, where the main effort was expected, the Soviets had as many as 148 guns and mortars per mile of front. In the sectors of the 6th and 7th Guards Armies of the Voronezh Front, the density was 25 guns per mile in the first line, and 23 in the second line. Two tank regiments and one tank brigade reinforced the antitank defenses in this sector. The fortification zone was more than 100 miles deep, to include the "national defense line" along the Don River, 150 to 175 miles to the rear.⁵⁰

The Soviets established antitank strongpoints in all sectors open to attack. Besides artillery and tanks, the Soviet antitank

defenses included large minefields, antitank ditches, and engineer obstacles.⁵¹

The Soviets sowed the terrain with an incredible number of mines, as many as 2,400 antitank and 2,700 antipersonnel mines per mile. In the Central Front alone, engineers sowed the fields with 400,000 mines.⁵²

To defend against the *Luftwaffe*, the Soviets greatly reinforced their antiaircraft defenses. By July the Central Front deployed five antiaircraft divisions from the Supreme Headquarters reserve, five regiments of medium caliber, and 23 regiments of small caliber artillery. The Voronezh Front had four antiaircraft divisions from Supreme Headquarters reserves, 25 antiaircraft regiments, three antiaircraft divisions, and five antiaircraft batteries. These forces enabled the fronts to cover a large number of objectives with multiple antiaircraft weapons systems. This air defense system inflicted heavy losses on the *Luftwaffe*.⁵³

By the time the Germans finally launched "Citadel," the Soviets were ready to stop them with an elaborate defense in depth. Hitler had given them all the time they needed to fortify their positions, refit their armies, and position their units. Von Manstein and von Kluge had been right when they insisted that a delay would aid the Soviets more than the Germans. In July every German advance through the heavily fortified Kursk salient would be met with heavy fire, which caused heavy losses in men and equipment. Germany would not be able to replace these losses in 1943.

New Tanks and War Production

Germany's New Tanks

The Germans expected decisive results from their newest tanks and self-propelled guns. These vehicles, however, had mechanical problems that by the summer of 1943 had not been corrected. The new vehicles were the Panther and Tiger I tanks, and the Ferdinand self-propelled gun. Hitler himself expected decisive results from these machines. One of the reasons for delaying "Citadel" for so long was to equip the attacking units with as many of these weapons as possible.

The Tiger and Panther would eventually become excellent tanks, but their mechanical problems could not be corrected in time for Operation "Citadel." The Panther in particular had been put into production without first undergoing adequate testing. The Ferdinand would fail to meet Hitler's expectations due to its slow speed, limited main gun traverse, and inability to defend against infantry.

The Tiger I was a heavy tank produced by Henschel. The order to design the tank came on 26 March 1941. Plans were to start production in July 1942, with 285 to be completed by 12 May 1943. The Tiger I mounted a 8.8cm gun.⁵⁴

Production actually started in August 1942. The gun and armor of the new Tiger were impressive, and in many aspects, it was the most powerful tank in service in 1942. Its ability to maneuver, however, was limited. It was almost unsteerable on soft ground. The tank was slow; its maximum speed was only 38 kilometers per hour (23.62 miles), compared to the Soviet T-34 tank maximum speed of 55 kilometers per hour (34.18

miles). Due to its relative lack of mobility, the Tiger I could not compete with the quick and maneuverable Soviet T-34 on offensive operations.⁵⁵

The weight of the Tiger I made recovery difficult. This was a serious problem, since its Maybach engine had frequent mechanical problems. Its best qualities were manifested when it was waiting, immobile, in an ambush, or in a defensive position. Its protective armor and its 8.8cm gun were then overwhelming.⁵⁶

In future defensive battles the Tiger I would become an excellent tank. Its heavy armor and gun made it a tank best suited for those types of operations. In that role it would even become legendary. The trade off, however, was its slow speed and limited maneuverability. This meant that at Kursk its qualities could not be fully exploited, since Kursk was a German offensive, not defensive operation. At Kursk the Tiger's speed and maneuverability, compared to the Soviet T-34, were disadvantages. Also, at Kursk many tank engagements were made at close range, thus negating one of the Tiger I advantages: its long range main gun. Hitler expected decisive results from a weapon whose best qualities could not be exploited at "Citadel."

The Panther was a heavy-medium tank. In 1941, after the Germans studied the Soviet T-34 tank, Hitler ordered the development of a similar vehicle in the 30 ton class. On 14 May 1942, after comparing the prints and statistics of the MAN and Daimler-Benz designs, Hitler selected the MAN version for production. Plans were to start production in December 1942, with 250 to be delivered by 12 May 1943.⁵⁷

The plates of the Panther's hull were angled, which increased its protection. The only vertical plate was the lower hull side plate. Production began in January 1943. The Germans issued the first Panthers in February. In April 1943, due to technical problems, the Germans stopped issuing new Panthers and recalled those already issued for major modifications. Finally, in May 1943, the 51st and 52nd tank detachments received the Panthers that were the first to go into action at Kursk.⁵⁸

The Panther was an excellent tank. It is generally considered the best German tank and perhaps the best tank of World War II. Like every new design, however, it was expected to have mechanical problems at the beginning of its production. Its seven speed transmission had difficulties, in part because it was designed to move a tank weighing 35 tons, not 43, the final weight of the Panther. The cooling system also proved deficient and the Panther had an alarming tendency to catch on fire. These defects would eventually be corrected, but not in time for the Battle of Kursk. At Kursk many Panthers caught fire without enemy intervention.⁵⁹ In July 1943 the Panthers were just not ready for combat and for this reason could not perform as expected.

The Ferdinand was a heavy assault gun. During the development of the Tiger I, Hitler demanded a turret design which could mount the long barreled 8.8cm gun. In September 1942 the Army Ordnance Office began design of a self propelled assault gun with 200mm frontal armor and the long barreled 8.8cm gun. The gun would be mounted on the Tiger(P) chassis. Despite the shortage of suspension parts and lack of test runs, on 6 February 1943 Hitler ordered that 90 Ferdinands be supplied to the front as soon as possible. Ninety were completed by May 1943.⁶⁰

The Ferdinand's hull was the same as that of the Tiger(P), with 100mm plates bolted to the front. The total thickness of the front hull was 200mm. The superstructure housed the long barreled 8.8cm gun in a limited traverse mount (28 degrees). It did not mount secondary armament until late in 1943.⁶¹

On paper the Ferdinand was a terrific weapon. Its 8.8cm gun and 200mm armor were formidable. However, its mobility was very restricted. Its maximum speed was only 20 kilometers per hour. It also had a very serious flaw: it lacked a support to mount a machine gun. Most of them had no machine guns, while others mounted an improvised one with limited traverse and difficult to use (with precision). Without machine guns, the Ferdinand could not defend against Soviet infantry, which was now beginning to be armed with hollow charge antitank weapons.⁶²

The combination of slow speed, lack of machine guns, and main gun limited traverse meant the Ferdinand was a defensive weapon, unsuited for offensive operations like "Citadel." As events would demonstrate at Kursk, offensively they were a complete failure.

War Production

By 1943 German war industries could not keep up with the combined production potential of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom. This was in spite of the fact that German industry was more organized than ever, although it was operating under increasing American and British bombing attacks.⁶³

In February 1942 Hitler named Albert Speer Minister of Armaments. Speer became an extremely competent administrator. When he

took over, he found that key industries still had only one work shift. He stopped production of many nonessential civilian items and introduced two and three work shifts at key factories. Speer also formed directive committees for the different weapon systems, and directive pools for the allocation of supplies. He formed 13 different directive committees, one for each category of armaments. Linking them were an equal number of directive pools.⁶⁴

The heads of the committees and the pools were to ensure that a given plant concentrated on producing only one item in maximum quantity. Speer provided plants guarantees of continued procurement. Plants consequently devoted maximum energy into manufacturing individual items, without worrying about sudden procurement contract cancellations. With these changes, Speer turned German armaments production from piecemeal production to mass production.⁶⁵ From the moment he took over, armaments production began to rise.

By August 1942, six months after Speer took over, production had increased by 27 percent in guns, 25 percent in tanks, and 97 percent in ammunition, compared to February 1942. Tank production went from 4,198 units in 1942 to 5,996 in 1943 and reached 8,328 in 1944 despite Allied bombing. The total number of tanks and self-propelled guns produced in 1944 was 19,087.⁶⁶

By comparison, the Soviets claimed that in 1943 they produced 24,000 tanks and self-propelled guns, of which at least 14,000 were T-34 tanks. In addition, as soon as Germany declared war on the United States on 11 December 1941, lend lease shipments began to flow to the Soviets. By the end of 1942 American lend lease aid began arriving in increasing

quantity, specially on field telephone wire and boots for the Soviet infantry. American aid in weapons such as tanks was not needed, since by 1942 the Soviets were producing the T-34 in large amounts. However, American aid in other categories, which began to arrive in abundance in 1943, helped increase the pace of Soviet offensives. For example, throughout the war the United states delivered over 40,000 jeeps and almost 330,000 trucks to the Soviets, all of them with good tactical mobility. The Soviets used them to accumulate supply stocks before a battle and to supply advancing troops.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, the United States produced an average of 33,600 tanks, armored cars, and self-propelled guns each year between 1942 and 1944.⁶⁸ Compared to the combined production of Soviet, American, and British industries, the German war effort was inadequate. As a result, Germany could not afford heavy losses at the Battle of Kursk.⁶⁹ The Allies could replace their losses while Germany could not. It was easy for Russia to replace a T-34. It was much more difficult for the Germans to replace a Panther or Tiger I tank. To make matters worse, as the war progressed, the gap in production between Germany and the Allies would increase. The German war effort would never catch up. The end result was that as time passed, the Allies became stronger and Germany weaker.

Even though the Anglo-American bombing campaign had not stopped German production, it was far from being a failure. The bombing offensive forced the *Luftwaffe* to move fighter forces from the operational theaters to defend Germany from air attacks.⁷⁰ This reduced the number of combat aircraft available to support the German combat forces. At Kursk the Soviet Air Force would outnumber the *Luftwaffe* and

would gain air superiority. With more airplanes diverted to Germany, the Germans could do little to regain command of the air.

The Germans were also forced to move 10,000 antiaircraft guns to Germany. They could have employed these same guns in other theaters, including Russia, and used them to destroy tanks and other ground targets.⁷¹ In the defensive battles that followed Operation "Citadel," the Germans could have used these guns to help stop the Soviet counteroffensives that followed.

Russian Intelligence.

Soviet intelligence before the battle continued to improve. By early June Zhukov knew most of the details of the German plan. He knew about the new Tiger and Panther tanks and about the Ferdinand self-propelled guns. A Soviet agent in Switzerland, code-named "Lucy" (Rudolf Rossler), provided Stalin with very accurate intelligence. Also, Moscow was finally working in close coordination with Soviet underground groups in the German Army's rear. These provided information on German troop concentrations and movements.⁷²

The "Lucy" ring was part of a much larger Soviet spy ring in Switzerland. It incorporated several groups of agents under the central direction of Alexander Rado (codename "Dora"). "Lucy" gained prominence through contacts with key German intelligence sources, in particular an agent who had access to the German high command, designated as "Werther." During the spring of 1943, "Lucy" provided important intelligence to the Soviets.⁷³

"Werther's" true identity remains unknown. Several specialists suggest that he was either a senior *Abwehr* (Intelligence Bureau of the OKW) officer, probably General Hans Oster, a combination of several *Abwehr* and Swiss intelligence officers, or Swiss intelligence officers alone. Oster was assistant to Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, Chief of the *Abwehr*,⁷⁴ and a strong anti-Nazi.

Soviet official sources acknowledge the contributions provided by the "Lucy" ring. Throughout the spring of 1943, "Lucy" provided Stalin with many of the day to day decisions of the OKW. However, evidence shows inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the data "Lucy" provided.⁷⁵ For example, in a message to Moscow on 23 June, "Werther," through "Lucy," reported the following:

OKW does not wish to provoke a large scale Russian offensive in the central sector. . . . Therefore one considers the German preventive attack planned for May-early June in the southern sector no longer serves a purpose. . . . Soviet build up in the Kursk area since early June is now so great that German superiority there no longer exists.⁷⁶

"Werther" was basically telling Moscow that the attack on Kursk was canceled. However, five days earlier Hitler had made the final decision to attack Kursk, and had approved the final plans.

"Lucy" and "Werther" alone did not provide all the decisive intelligence needed for a Soviet victory at Kursk. The substantial Soviet tactical intelligence collection effort, coming primarily through Soviet field units, provided the bulk of the data on the impending German attack on Kursk.⁷⁷

During the first half of 1943, the Red Army significantly improved division level staffs. The most significant change involved the

addition of an interpreter to each staff. This allowed staffs to interrogate prisoners directly and obtain tactical intelligence of immediate importance.⁷⁸

Before the Battle of Kursk, the Central and Voronezh Fronts carried out 105 reconnaissance in force missions, more than 2,600 night raids and ambushes, and captured 187 German soldiers. The Soviets paid considerable attention to their interrogation, which provided important information. For example, Soviet accounts confirm that several prisoners taken during the night of 4-5 July provided proof of the impending attack.⁷⁹ As a result, the first Soviet units that would absorb the main weight of the German advance were prepared. They were ready to meet the impending German offensive and from the beginning of the battle inflicted heavy casualties on the Germans. German units would pay a heavy price for every advance they made.

The Soviets also obtained information from signals intelligence. By the time of "Citadel" the Soviets were intercepting and decrypting enciphered German communications. They were also "fixing" German units and positions through radio direction finding and recognition of call signs. Radio direction finding and monitoring units provided very important information, such as the location of the headquarters and units of the II SS Panzer Corps and the 6th and 11th Panzer Divisions, before the German offensive began.⁸⁰ By the time the Germans started the offensive, the Soviets had identified most of the German units. The strength of the German attack did not surprise them.

Soviet agents operating behind German lines also provided detailed information. By the summer of 1944, German counter intelligence

had identified 20,000 Soviet agents and estimated that 10,000 new agents were available every three months. Some of these agents belonged to or provided intelligence to army field intelligence staffs. Long range reconnaissance patrols infiltrated German lines, moved into rear areas, and provided information on German dispositions and installations. Individual agents, who did not belong to any Red Army operational command, slipped across the front, penetrated German positions, and provided information on German preparations, emplacements, and movements. Some of these agents captured important German officers, who provided valuable information.⁸¹

Soviet partisans greatly facilitated the work of these agents. The partisans carried out their own intelligence missions in occupied territory. The German 9th Army attributed most of the Soviet espionage in its sector during June and July 1943 to partisans moving from the west, rather than across the Soviet lines in the east.⁸² Partisan activities probably had a demoralizing effect on the Germans. The Germans knew they could be attacked from any direction. Even in the rear areas the Germans could not relax. They had to be alert at all times. Partisan activities also forced the Germans to move substantial forces to the rear. These forces had to protect German installations, command centers, and lines of communications from partisan attacks. This reduced the number of forces available to conduct combat operations against the Red Army.

By using the normal intelligence gathering techniques available to its army units, the Soviets built an accurate picture of the German dispositions, strength, and intentions at Kursk. They used aerial

reconnaissance, physical observation, prisoner interrogation, signal intelligence and agent activity.⁸³

Poor German Operations Security (OPSEC) also contributed to the Soviet intelligence collection effort. For example, on 7 July a Soviet deserter told the Germans that they betrayed their intentions at Kursk when they began to clear their minefields on 26 June. Another example comes from a report by the Soviet 154th Rifle Regiment. It stated that the observed movements of German tanks and motorized infantry into forward positions from 2 to 4 July indicated an attack by 5 or 6 July.⁸⁴

By early May Zhukov knew that the main flow of German troops and equipment was towards Orel, Kromy, Bryansk, Kharkov, Krasnograd, and Poltava. By 22 May he knew about the location of most of the German divisions facing the Central Front. By early July, Supreme Headquarters and the individual fronts established the exact time of the German offensive.⁸⁵

Zhukov consequently possessed considerable information during the planning for the Kursk operation. He used it to reinforce expected German avenues of approach, position his reserves where they could launch counterattacks, and mass his mobile formations behind the Kursk salient and away from danger. Zhukov even used intelligence information to hit the Germans in their attack positions with artillery fire, just prior to the start of their attack. Through captured German prisoners, Zhukov learned the exact time of the German assault.⁸⁶ When the Germans finally launched Operation "Citadel," the Soviets were not surprised. They were expecting it and were ready to stop it, counterattack, and resume offensive operations.

German intelligence also provided Hitler with information that demonstrated the Soviets were expecting this attack. As already mentioned, in early May Field Marshal Model gave Hitler information that indicated the Soviets were preparing deep and very strong defensive positions. Model concluded the Soviets were expecting the attack.⁸⁷ The Army High Command intelligence section for the Eastern Front accurately identified the large scale Soviet reinforcements and fortification of the area.⁸⁸ Hitler, however, still decided to proceed with the attack, through the same area his intelligence identified as being heavily fortified. The Germans paid a heavy price for this decision.

Soviet intelligence, however, was not perfect at Kursk. The most serious misappraisal was that the Soviets believed that Army Group Center's attack out of the Orel salient was the main effort. As a result, the heaviest Soviet defenses, obstacles, and fortifications were on the Central Front sector. This facilitated the 4th Panzer Army's deeper penetration of the Soviet defenses in the Voronezh Front. These shortcomings, nevertheless, must not overshadow the operational and strategic value of Soviet intelligence's contributions. "Citadel" could have succeeded at least in denying Stalin the strategic initiative, had it not been for the abundant and well positioned Soviet reserves held ready for commitment.⁸⁹

Final Preparations.

By the summer of 1943 the Soviet Union had about 6.4 million soldiers, with 99,000 guns, nearly 10,000 tanks, and 8,500 planes.⁹⁰ The Soviet Central Committee and State Defense Committee gave particular

attention to tank production. By the summer of 1943, the Soviets had, in addition to individual mechanized and tank corps, five well equipped tank armies, each with two tank and one mechanized corps. The Soviets also formed 18 heavy tank regiments to strengthen the field armies and ensure breakthroughs in German defenses.⁹¹

Germany had a total of about 243 army and 11 SS divisions, 4,484,000 men, 5,305 tanks and self-propelled guns, 56,000 guns, and 3,000 planes. Committed to the Eastern front, the Germans had 168 army divisions, 3,115,000 men, 2,269 tanks and 997 self-propelled guns.⁹²

The Soviet Union outnumbered German forces operating on the Eastern Front by more than 2 to 1 in men, and almost 3 to 1 in tanks and self-propelled guns, and in aircraft. These ratios suggest that the most appropriate strategy for Germany would have been a defense that would control Soviet penetrations, creating assailable flanks that would allow the Germans to conduct local counterattacks. The purpose of this type of strategy would have been to wear down the Soviets to the point where the force ratios would prove more favorable to the Germans. This could have led to a stalemate in the East. By attacking a numerically superior and fully prepared opponent, Hitler incurred losses that, due to the combined manpower and production capabilities of the Allies, he could not afford. When Hitler executed "Citadel," he abandoned the only strategy that could still conclude the war on even terms for Germany.

Until the very end, Guderian kept trying to persuade Hitler to abandon the planned offensive. The Panther tanks still had track, suspension and drive problems and the optics were unsatisfactory. On 16 June he told Hitler the Panthers were not yet ready for combat. On the

18th he reported to Hitler that, besides the Panther's technical problems, neither the crews nor the commanders were well trained, while some crews lacked adequate combat experience. But that was not enough to make Hitler abandon Operation "Citadel."⁹³

For the Kursk offensive, the Germans allocated about 30 divisions, 18 of them armored or motorized, 1,855 tanks, 533 self-propelled guns, 10,000 guns, and 2,000 planes. They had about 900,000 men. The Germans committed everything their armed forces could muster. Hitler had said this offensive must not fail; even a return to the original lines meant defeat.⁹⁴

The two armies the Germans would use for "Citadel" comprised much of the German strategic reserve. If they suffered heavy losses, Germany would have few forces left with which to respond to new or unexpected Soviet threats. A counterattack, like the one von Manstein conducted in March to recapture Kharkov, would be improbable.⁹⁵

The Soviets committed 20,000 guns, more than 3,600 tanks, 3,130 planes, and 1,330,000 men. They were numerically superior to the Germans in every major weapons category, and could absorb more losses. Also, while the new German tanks were full of mechanical problems, the Soviet T-34 main battle tank was reliable, maneuverable, and free of defects.⁹⁶

The final German operational plans involved two nearly simultaneous strikes by large armored forces against narrow sectors north and south of the Kursk salient (See map at Figure 5). In the north, the 9th German Army's XLVII Panzer Corps would spearhead the attack, advancing south along the rail and highway line to Kursk. It was to link

up with the 4th Panzer Army coming from the south. The XLVI Panzer Corps would cover the XLVII Panzer Corps left flank. The 4th and 12th Panzer Divisions, and the 10th Panzergrenadier Division, would be available to reinforce the attack. In total, 552 tanks and 280 self-propelled guns would attack the Soviet positions on a 19 to 20 mile front.⁹⁷

In the south, the 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf (*Armeeabteilung Kempf*) would strike north and northeast from positions to the west and south of Belgorod. After destroying the Soviet defenses, they would link up with the 9th Army near Kursk. The 4th Panzer Army would deliver its main attack with the XLVIII Panzer Corps and the II SS Panzer Corps, advancing abreast to the north and northeast from positions west of Belgorod. Army Detachment Kempf, to the right flank of the 4th Panzer Army, would destroy Soviet defenses to the west of Belgorod, then push the III Panzer Corps either northeast in cooperation with the II SS Panzer Corps, or eastward towards Korocho. The combined strength of the 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf was 1,303 tanks and 253 self-propelled guns, of which 1,111 and 231 were operational, respectively.⁹⁸

The German plan was logical to a fault. The Kursk salient would be eliminated and all Soviet forces within it destroyed by a double envelopment. These were the same old tactics the Germans had used in 1941 at Minsk, Kiev, and Vyazma. By 1943 the Soviets knew those tactics and how to stop them. The German plan had no chance for achieving surprise.⁹⁹

To defeat the German attack, the Soviet Central Front positioned its forces in single echelon along a 300 kilometer (186 miles) front to the north of Kursk, with the 60th, 65th, 70th, 13th, and 48th armies

abreast (from left to right), backed up by the 2nd Tank Army and two separate tank corps (See map at Figure 5). The Voronezh Front deployed, from left to right, the 38th, 40th, 6th Guards, and 7th Guards Rifle Armies in its first echelon, backed up by the 69th and 1st Tank Armies, two separate tank corps, and a separate rifle corps. Each combined arms army in the Central and Voronezh Fronts occupied three defensive belts.¹⁰⁰

Both the Central and Voronezh Fronts created two additional front defensive belts behind of the three army defensive belts. The two fronts deployed a total of about 3,300 tanks and self propelled guns.¹⁰¹

At this time a Soviet tank corps was made up of three tank brigades and a motorized infantry brigade. A mechanized corps had a tank brigade and three motorized infantry brigades, each with a tank battalion.¹⁰² A tank corps would have about 180 tanks and a mechanized corps about 200. These corps were normally formed in groups of three, usually two tank and one mechanized corps, to form a tank army.¹⁰³ A Soviet tank army consisting of two tank and a mechanized corps would have about 560 tanks. In total number of tanks, the strength of the 1943 Soviet tank corps was equivalent to about half the size of a modern U.S. Army division.

In the planning of the Kursk battle, the Soviet Supreme Headquarters made special efforts to have available large reserves. Behind the Kursk salient, the Supreme Headquarters concentrated the forces of the new Steppe Front. It was to stop any German breakthrough and reinforce the Soviet striking force when they launched their counteroffensive. The Steppe Front had four field armies, one tank army,

one mechanized corps, and three cavalry corps. The 5th Air Army provided support. General Ivan S. Konev commanded the Steppe Front, which became the Supreme Headquarters strategic reserve.¹⁰⁴

By the end of June, it was clear to the Soviets that the Germans were about to launch their Kursk offensive. On 30 June Stalin told Zhukov to stay in the Orel sector and coordinate the operations of the Central, Bryansk, and Western Fronts. Vasilevsky would be in charge of the Voronezh Front.¹⁰⁵

The Battle of Kursk.

The German attack finally began at 1600 hours on 4 July (See map at Figure 5). General Hermann Hoth's 4th Panzer Army attacked in the southern sector of the front. From the area of Belgorod, six panzer, five *Panzergrenadier*, and seven infantry divisions attacked. As the German tanks moved out of their hidden positions close to the front, the Soviet guns laid a barrage of fire.¹⁰⁶

Zhukov was at the Orel sector command post, in the northern sector of the front, when the attack began. The Soviets were expecting it. A captured German had told Vasilevsky that the attack was about to begin and would spread to the north at dawn, 5 July.¹⁰⁷ On the night of 4 July, General Konstantin Rokossovsky's men captured German engineers who were removing mines in front of the 13th and 48th Army defenses. The prisoners confirmed that the attack in the Central Front would start at 0300 hours on 5 July and that troops were already at the line of departure.¹⁰⁸

Zhukov ordered Soviet guns to open fire against the suspected German positions. He then called Stalin and told him what he had done. Stalin was nervous and could not sleep.¹⁰⁹

The Soviet guns started to fire at 0220 hours. In the middle of the artillery bombardment, Stalin called. He asked Zhukov if he had already started the battle. Zhukov said yes. Stalin asked what the enemy was doing. Zhukov replied that he was trying counterbattery fire, but it was not effective.¹¹⁰

The Germans did not expect the artillery bombardment. German artillery suffered greatly and their communications, observation and control systems were disrupted. But Soviet artillery lacked exact information on troop assembly areas. As a result, the Soviets directed fire against areas rather than specific targets. This enabled the Germans to avoid excessive losses. Within two and a half hours the Germans started their offensive in the north, in the sector of the Central Front, and advanced two to four miles on the first day.¹¹¹

German aircraft took off between 0430 and 0500 hours. Simultaneously, German artillery opened fire against the Central Front, concentrating in the area of the 13th Army. Minutes later the Germans attacked with three panzer divisions and five infantry divisions in their first line of attack.¹¹² Model's 9th Army began the attack from the north with a total of six panzer, one *Panzergranadier*, and eight infantry divisions, from the area west of Orel.¹¹³

The German forces in the first line struck at the 13th Army and the adjoining flanks of the 48th and 70th armies. The German attack in the north hit mainly the 13th Army, commanded by Lieutenant General N. P.

Pukhov. He deployed his army in a 25 mile sector astride the rail line to Kursk. The Russians met the attack with powerful fire from their entire defense system and repulsed it, inflicting heavy losses. For seven days German armored and infantry formations advanced forward through Pukhov's first echelon rifle corps.¹¹⁴

On 5 July the Germans attempted five times to break through the Soviet defenses, but without substantial results. Model's main thrust narrowed down to a ten mile sector. He had his Tiger and Ferdinand vehicles forward. Their job was to smash through the Soviet defenses. Soviet gunners and infantrymen, however, fought fanatically. They even brought their 45mm guns (which were ineffective against the Tiger's armor) into action to fire at the tracks of the Tigers, in an effort to immobilize them.¹¹⁵ Firing at the Tiger tanks with a 45mm gun showed the fanaticism with which Soviet troops were fighting. It was almost impossible to hit the tracks of a moving tank with a 45mm gun. Even when a light shell hit the Tiger's tracks, there was no guarantee that they would break. Still, the Soviet soldier fired with whatever weapon he had available, trying to stop the German attack.

On all sectors of the front the Soviet troops held their lines. Only at the end of the day did the Germans succeed in advancing two to four miles, in the area of Olkhovatka. By nightfall, Soviet defenses had destroyed approximately 110 tanks and self-propelled guns.¹¹⁶

On 5 and 6 July the Germans advanced up to six miles. By 6 July the Germans had broken through the lead divisions of the first echelon rifle corps of the 13th Army. At dawn on 6 July the Soviets counterattacked at Olkhovatka with the 17th Guards Infantry and the 16th

Tank Corps. Units of the 17th Guards Infantry Corps penetrated up to two kilometers (1.24 miles), where they were joined by units of the 15th and 81st divisions. The Germans committed 250 tanks against the advancing Soviet corps and stopped them. The Soviet corps withdrew to their original positions, but the German attempt to break into the second defensive line on the back of the retreating corps was defeated.¹¹⁷

On 7 July, after regrouping their tank forces, the Germans launched an attack against Ponyri. All day the battle on the ground and in the air engulfed the area. The Germans kept pouring new tank units into the battle, but were unable to achieve a breakthrough. However, by the end of the day, the Germans had driven into the defensive belt occupied by the 13th Army Corps' second echelon divisions, which were deployed between Kashary and Ponyri Station. The Soviet Central Front released three tank corps of the 2nd Tank Army to Pukhov's control. By 7 July, these tank corps advanced into the middle of the German assault.¹¹⁸

Vicious fighting followed, as the Germans committed new forces and attacked first towards Ponyri, then Olkhovatka. This was a desperate attempt to slice through the dense mass of Soviet infantry supported by large numbers of self propelled artillery, antitank guns, tanks, and sapper units, which constantly kept sowing new minefields.¹¹⁹

The fighting continued through 7 and 8 July towards Olkhovatka. Straining to shake off Rokossovsky's reserves and strike out into the open, the center corps of the 9th Army ran into a heavily fortified ridge southwest of Olkhovatka. The Soviet 17th Infantry Corps, 2nd Tank Army, and Central Front artillery and aviation forced the German corps to stop.¹²⁰

Surprised at finding such a strong position so far behind the original front, Model predicted that even after the ridge was taken, there would not be a quick breakthrough to Kursk. After two attempts to take the ridge on 10 and 11 July failed, Army Group Center promised to send Model an infantry and a Panzer division to help break the deadlock.¹²¹

On 12 July the Soviet's Bryansk and West Fronts launched an offensive against the northern part of the Orel salient. The 2nd Panzer Army, holding a 170 mile front with only 14 divisions, could not prevent quick Soviet penetrations. Before noon, Field Marshal Guenther von Kluge, Commander of Army Group Center, had to divert the two divisions intended to help the 9th Army to 2nd Panzer Army. In the afternoon von Kluge had to tell Model to give up two more panzer divisions.¹²²

Without reinforcements, Model could not advance. On 12 July the German attack in the north ended from sheer exhaustion. The Soviets prevented the Germans from achieving their goal of a tactical penetration.¹²³

The Soviets indicated that in the first two days of the battle, Model suffered 25,000 casualties and lost 200 tanks and self-propelled guns. Many of his disabled Ferdinands remained on the battlefield. Once immobilized, few German vehicles could recover them; only a Tiger tank could do it. When, due to the Soviet counterattacks, the Germans had to abandon the battlefield, many of the disabled Ferdinands, which the Germans could not recover, fell to the Soviets.¹²⁴

In the south, Hoth was able to achieve deeper penetrations of the Soviet lines, but not enough to seal off the Kursk salient or force

the Soviets to withdraw. Hoth inflicted grave losses to the Soviets, but they seemed to have unlimited resources, and the Soviets, in turn, inflicted heavy losses on the Germans.¹²⁵ Hoth's deepest penetration was around Prokhorovka, still about 60 miles away from Kursk, where he was expected to link up with Model's Ninth Army.

Hoth's 4th Panzer Army first hit Lieutenant General I. M. Chistyakov's 6th Guards Army deployed northwest of Belgorod. The principle German thrust in this sector was along the axis Tomarovka-Oboyan, and in the 7th Guards Army sector towards Belgorod-Korochoa. Army Detachment Kempf attacked the 7th Guards Army of Lieutenant General M. S. Shumilov, to the east of Belgorod. Massed tanks from the XLVIII Panzer Corps and II SS Panzer Corps cut deeply into the 6th Guards Army front. By the end of 5 July, the Germans had penetrated Chistyakov's lead rifle divisions' positions. Late in the day, the Voronezh Front released the 1st Tank Army (General M. Y. Katukov) and its reserve rifle corps to stop the 4th Panzer Army advance.¹²⁶

Southwest of Belgorod the III Panzer Corps, held up by fierce Soviet resistance east of Belgorod, switched its attack towards the south. It hit the 7th Guards Army first echelon divisions near Razumnoye.¹²⁷

On 6 July the Germans managed to break through the 6th Guards Army forward defenses in several places and close to the second line. The latter was occupied by the 1st Tank Army and the 2nd and 5th Guards Tank Corps. The 6th Guards and 1st Tank Armies continued to resist and inflicted great losses on the Germans. During 5 and 6 July the Germans

advanced only 6 to 11 miles, not enough to ensure freedom for a flank maneuver.¹²⁸

Shortly after 0400 on 7 July the II SS Panzer Corps launched an attack along the Belgorod-Kursk highway. The Germans committed nearly 400 tanks and self-propelled guns.¹²⁹ This was an armored thrust along the shortest route to Oboyan. Fighting went on throughout the day. The 1st Tank Army took the main blow of this attack. The 6th Guards and 1st Tank Armies were able to hold the second line of defense, except in two places where the Germans drove seven and a half miles deep into the rear of the Soviet defense line. The Germans suffered heavy casualties, however, and failed to close in on Oboyan.¹³⁰

On the morning of 8 July fighting resumed along the Kharkov-Kursk highway, as the Germans resumed their attacks towards Oboyan. That night the Germans concentrated five Panzer divisions for a new attack towards Oboyan. The units for the attack were the *Panzergranadier Grossdeutschland*, 3rd and 11th Panzer Divisions, from the XLVIII Panzer Corps, and the *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* and *Totenkopf* SS Panzer Divisions from the II SS Panzer Corps. This force was to advance on 9 July along the highway through Oboyan towards Kursk. At the end of the day, the Germans had advanced up to five miles, but had lost about 295 tanks. The 4th Panzer Army had lost too many tanks to continue its advance on Oboyan. Although it had advanced almost 20 miles, it had failed to break through towards Oboyan.¹³¹

On 11 July, with the road to Oboyan again blocked by Soviet defenses, the 4th Panzer Army switched its main effort to the northwest towards Prokhorovka. There it collided in a meeting engagement with

Lieutenant General P. A. Rotmistrov's reinforced 5th Guards Tank Army, from the Soviet operational reserve.¹³² The 5th Guards Tank Army had orders to counterattack on the morning of 12 July, around the west and southwest of Prokhorovka. It was to attack over a 15 kilometer (9.3 miles) wide zone.¹³³

The new German plan was to seize Kursk in a wide turning movement to the east. In this effort the Germans concentrated their strongest SS tank divisions: *Totenkopf*, *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*, and *Das Reich*, all part of the II SS Panzer Corps.¹³⁴ The resulting tank battle was the climax of the battle of Kursk. On 12 July Stalin ordered Zhukov to fly to the Prokhorovka sector, north of Belgorod. Zhukov's orders were to study the situation and coordinate the Voronezh and Steppe Fronts operations.¹³⁵

The Soviets reinforced the 5th Guards Tank Army's two armored and one mechanized corps with two additional armored corps. The reinforced 5th Guards Tank Army was a fresh force of 850 tanks and self-propelled guns. The Germans were moving forward to attack with about 600 tanks, all that remained of their original force. These included about 100 Tigers. The resulting tank battle around Prokhorovka broke the back of the German assault and ended any hopes for German operational and strategic victories.¹³⁶

At 0830 hours on 12 July, after a 15 minute artillery preliminary fire, the 5th Guards Tank Army attacked with its first echelon tank corps, supported by the air force. The Germans responded with artillery fire, an attack of heavy tanks, and massive air strikes. Massed Soviet and German armored formations moved towards each other.

The first echelon of Soviet tanks cut rapidly into the German battle formations. The attack was so fast that the front ranks of the Soviet tanks passed through the German formation.¹³⁷

The fighting in the Prokhorovka sector was extremely bitter. It was difficult to figure out who was attacking whom. Hundreds of tanks were moving on the battlefield, so there was no room to maneuver. Tanks fired at each other at point blank range. In the close range battle, the German Tiger I tanks could not use their superior armor and firepower against the more maneuverable T-34 tank.¹³⁸ At close range, it was easier to penetrate the front and side armor of the Tiger. They were also easier to engage, since they had to stop to deliver their fire.¹³⁹

By noon it was becoming evident that the first echelons of the 5th Guards Tank Army were winning. By 1400 hours the 18th Tank Corps liberated several small villages. The 29th Tank Corps, after routing the main forces of the *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* and *Totenkopf* SS Panzer divisions in a counterattack, advanced over one mile by 1300 hours. The 2nd Guards Tank Corps was also successful in a meeting engagement against the *Das Reich* SS Panzer Division. By evening several 5th Guards Tank Army units had advanced up to three and a half miles.¹⁴⁰

In the afternoon the Germans committed their reserves in the fight against the 5th Guards Tank Army. Another fierce battle followed, which lasted until late that evening. When darkness came both sides went over to the defensive. By nightfall the Germans had lost over 350 tanks; the Soviets probably lost more. German losses included 70 Tigers, along with 88 self-propelled guns and more than 300 trucks. About half of Rotmistrov's army was destroyed. No one, German or Russian, had seen

anything like this battle. The battlefield was a heap of broken and burning steel, machines, and human bodies. Both sides had taken and delivered fearful punishment. However, the German attack had been stopped. The Soviets could sustain their losses. The Germans could not.¹⁴¹

Guderian visited both attacking fronts on 10 July. His fears concerning the premature commitment of the Panthers had been justified. Also, the Ferdinand guns, operating with Model's army in the north, were incapable of close range fighting. Without machine guns, once they broke into the enemy's infantry they had to shoot at them with cannons. This did not neutralize the enemy rifles and machine guns, so the German infantry was unable to follow behind them. By the time they reached the Soviet artillery, if they ever did, they were on their own. Many were destroyed by the Soviet infantry.¹⁴²

Stalin did not withhold the news of the battle to his people, as he had done in the past. The news release of 6 July said that 586 tanks were destroyed the previous day. The next day the number was 433, the day after 520, and the next day 304. The Russian people did not necessarily accept these numbers as completely accurate. However, they gave an idea of the magnitude of the fighting, and a clear indication that the Soviets were winning.¹⁴³

The Aftermath.

On 13 July, Hitler called von Kluge and von Manstein to a conference. Hitler had decided to stop "Citadel."¹⁴⁴ He said the western Allies had just landed in Sicily. The situation there had taken

a very serious turn. The Italians were not fighting and it was probable that Sicily would be lost. Since the next Allied step would be a landing in the Balkans or southern Italy, the Germans must form new armies in Italy and the western Balkans. These forces must be taken from the Eastern Front, so "Citadel" would have to be canceled. The very thing which von Manstein had warned Hitler of in May came to pass.¹⁴⁵

The first part of the Soviet counterattack in the northern sector began on 12 July. Troops from the Bryansk Front, and the 11th Guards Army of the Western Front broke through the German defenses on the first day and advanced towards Orel. The Germans tried to keep control of the Orel bridgehead by moving units from the Central Front to the threatened area. The Central Front took advantage of this and began its counteroffensive on 15 July.¹⁴⁶

On 17 July Hitler ordered the II SS Panzer Corps to transfer to Italy. After Benito Mussolini's capture on 25 July, Hitler also decided to evacuate the Orel salient to release more troops for Italy. On 1 August, Model, now in command of the 2nd Panzer and 9th Armies, began to withdraw from the Orel area towards the *Hagen* position. This was a line of field fortifications across the base of the Orel salient. On the 14th the first German units moved into the *Hagen* position. On the night of the 17th, the last German troops moved into it. By 18 August, the Soviet Central and Bryansk Fronts occupied the entire Orel salient.¹⁴⁷

On 3 August the Soviet counteroffensive in the southern sector began. The 5th and 6th Guard Armies, the 1st Tank Army, and the 5th Guards Tank Army, from the Voronezh Front, advanced 20 miles on that day.

The Steppe Front also attacked, penetrating almost ten miles on the first day. On 4 August, Belgorod fell.¹⁴⁸

After taking Belgorod, the Soviets moved towards Kharkov. To avoid entrapment, on 22 August the Germans began to pull out their troops. On 23 August troops from the Steppe Front entered Kharkov.¹⁴⁹ The Soviet offensives would end up recapturing the whole Ukraine by the winter of 1943-44.¹⁵⁰

Hitler now had to turn his attention to the Allied invasion of Sicily (10 July). Stalin, meanwhile, ordered the salute guns of Moscow to fire the first of an unbroken series of victory salutes, 12 salvos from 120 guns, celebrating the recapture of Orel and Belgorod by the victors of Kursk.¹⁵¹

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CHAPTER 5

THE RESULTS OF THE BATTLE OF KURSK, IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY, AND CONCLUSIONS

With the failure of Operation "Citadel," Germany suffered a defeat from which she could never recover. In previous defeats, and after losing the initiative to the Soviets, the Germans had stabilized the front, counterattacked, and regained the initiative. At Kursk the initiative passed to the Soviets, who would never lose it again. The Soviets then began offensive operations that would continue until they captured Berlin in 1945.

The Soviets won the Battle of Kursk for several reasons. The primary reason was superior Soviet generalship. The German attack plan was very logical, and did almost exactly what the Soviets expected. Soviet intelligence and poor German operations security (OPSEC) corroborated German intentions. The Soviets then planned accordingly.

The Soviet plan was flexible. It planned to meet the expected German attack with a powerful defense to wear down the Germans and then counterattack to go over to the offensive. The Soviets prepared defenses in depth that integrated all weapon systems against the expected German avenues of approach. They also ensured they had enough reserves in positions from where they could launch counterattacks to block German penetrations, and from which they could resume offensive operations.

Hitler helped the Soviets by giving them plenty of time to build and improve their defenses. He compounded the error by attacking as the Soviets expected, through a heavily fortified area. The heavy defensive system caused heavy losses on the Germans, which they could not afford. This, in combination with the superior Soviet operational plans and numerical superiority doomed the Germans.

When the Western Allies landed in Sicily on 10 July 1943, Hitler was forced to cancel "Citadel" and acknowledge defeat. By then the Soviets had already started their own counteroffensive against the Orel sector of the German attack, forcing them to stop their offensive and assume a defensive posture. For practical purposes, the German offensive was over before Hitler admitted its failure.

German and Soviet Tactical Doctrine

German Tactical Doctrine

The German tactical doctrine had very few changes in organization and tactics between 1941 to 1943.¹ The German plan to eliminate the Kursk salient involved the use of two pincers, designed to penetrate Soviet defenses and encircle and destroy all Soviet forces inside the salient. The Germans were basically using the same tactics of encirclement used at Minsk and Kiev back in 1941. The Soviets had seen the same tactics several times between 1941 and 1943. By 1943 they knew what to expect and how to stop a German attack at Kursk, whenever it came.

The most serious problem in the German Army after the Battle of Kursk in 1943 was not tactics, however, but training and tactical

proficiency. The years from 1943 to 1945 saw a constant erosion in the quality of the German Army. The primary reason was the lack of adequately trained replacements.² Due to the shortage of replacements, as early as 1942 the German Army directed 69 of 75 infantry divisions on the Eastern front to disband three of their nine battalions.³

In order to sustain their armies, the Germans progressively reduced the amount of training given to replacements and even used training units in combat during Soviet breakthroughs. This became a vicious cycle, as poorly trained German soldiers survived for only short periods at the front and had to be replaced even faster than before.⁴

The decline of German Army quality and tactical proficiency started in the 1941 Eastern Front campaign, continued during 1942, and culminated at Kursk. After Kursk, several factors combined to create problems that the German Army could no longer control. These included the losses sustained in two years of war with the Soviets, the lack of adequately trained replacements, lack of reserves and equipment, and the fact that Germany was fighting not only the Soviet Union but the United States and Britain as well. After the Western Allies defeated the Germans in North Africa and landed in Sicily, Hitler had to divert units to the west. This aggravated the German situation. Because they were forced to divert troops to the west, it became impossible for the Germans to replace their losses in the east.

Soviet Tactical Doctrine

Soviet tactical doctrine for offensive and defensive operations continued to improve during 1943. As the German Army's quality declined

and as it became weaker, the Soviet Union's Army became stronger. It continued to improve.

The Soviets at Kursk used a defense in depth. In the past, German forces had to penetrate the defenses of two regiments and sometimes a second echelon division to overcome the Soviet tactical defenses. At Kursk the Germans had to penetrate the defensive positions of three divisions, each arrayed in two echelons, before reaching the Soviet operational rear. Soviet tactical defense integrated armored forces to a higher degree than before. Most of the rifle divisions defending on main attack axes had tank and self-propelled artillery battalions, regiments, or even brigades in support. The Soviets integrated armor into antitank areas and strongpoints and into battalion and regimental defensive positions. Other armor elements formed tank reserves at rifle division and corps levels.⁵

Soviet tactical defenses at Kursk linked their defensive positions and belts with engineer obstacles. Defensive positions were tied in with the supporting fires of antitank and antiaircraft artillery. Artillery of all types and calibers provided resilience to the defense and attrited enemy forces. At Kursk the Soviets also integrated their antitank defenses into every level of command. These were scattered throughout the defense and massed on likely armor avenues of approach.⁶

This defense in depth was the primary reason for the German failure at Kursk. The Germans attacked through a heavily fortified area, where infantry, tanks, artillery, antitank weapons, obstacles, minefields, and air support were integrated into the defensive plan. The combination of all of these weapon systems proved too much for the German

armored and infantry divisions to overcome. As the Germans moved, they suffered heavy casualties that in the end made further German attacks impossible. The Germans paid a heavy price for attacking the Soviets at their strongest point.

After "Citadel" the Soviets initiated continuous offensive operations that seldom stopped until they reached Berlin. The Soviets held the strategic and operational initiative until the end of the war. Their offensive successes resulted in part to their numerical superiority in men and equipment, but other factors were involved.

In their offensive doctrine the Soviets preferred to achieve decisive results by a few deep thrusts. The Germans usually massed as many forces as possible at the decisive point. In contrast, the Soviet concentration in the zone of the main attack was less pronounced. Normally they built up the main effort gradually by launching a series of successive thrusts.⁷

Although at Stalingrad the Soviets conducted an almost perfect encirclement of enemy forces, they did not use the double envelopment as often as did the Germans. The Soviets preferred to conduct a single thrust, or multiple thrusts along a broad front. The objective was not so much to achieve a deep penetration along one line of advance, like the Germans did, but to force the enemy back on a broad front. These tactics were well suited to the southern sector of the front, where successive, roughly parallel rivers afforded natural defense lines. Thrusts from one river line to the next resulted in the recapture of vast amounts of Soviet territory.⁸ These were the tactics which the Soviets used after the Battle of Kursk to conduct their offensive operations in the southern

sector of the front. With this approach the Soviets recaptured most of the Ukraine by the end of the year.

The first objective of German offensives had been to quickly destroy the enemy's main force. The purpose was to produce a decision. The Soviets, however, cared less for speed or the fatal stroke. They preferred to wear down the Germans blow by blow. They evaluated their victories as much in terms of recaptured territory as in terms of damage inflicted on the enemy. The Soviets' ultimate objective was to destroy the Germans, but by the cumulative effect of repeated offensives, not by a single battle.⁹ These were less decisive than the German tactics and it would take longer to defeat the German Army this way. By attacking on broad fronts, the Soviets would also suffer heavy casualties. However, since they possessed more men and equipment, they could afford these tactics. The Soviets continued to absorb heavy casualties throughout 1943, but they could sustain their losses much better than the Germans.

The Soviet offensive tactic of using multiple thrusts on a broad front had the advantage of extending the offensive laterally. It allowed the Soviets to bring strength against a number of points and eliminate the risks inherent in trying to follow one clearly defined line of advance. The Soviets achieved success by launching a series of thrusts from convenient lines of departure. This technique significantly eased their supply problems. The assembly of troops could be carried out over a number of rail lines and none of the thrusts had to go so deep as to outrun its own supply lines. Even though the broad front tactics worked, they were at best a modified linear method of warfare. It required

massed troops, repeated frontal encounters, and an enemy that was willing, as Hitler was, to respond with an inflexible linear defense.¹⁰

The broad front tactics succeeded at a heavy cost. Frontal attacks are the most costly form of maneuver. The Soviets achieved victory in part because of their numerical superiority. Another important reason, however, was that by 1943 Hitler was interfering more and more with the daily operations of the German Army. He assumed an inflexible defensive doctrine of fighting for every piece of terrain and forbidding retreats until it was usually too late. In this manner, he aided the Soviets by doing exactly what they wanted him to do.

The 1943 Soviet Army had its limitations; however, it was quickly becoming one of the most powerful armies in the world. In 1943 the Soviets still faced the majority of the German Army's divisions. On 1 July 1943 the Soviets were facing 168 of 243 German Army divisions.¹¹ Although the majority of the German strength was concentrated against them, and had been since 1941, after "Citadel" the Soviets relentlessly pushed the Germans back and the Germans could do little to stop them. After Kursk the Germans would seldom enjoy a period of quiet on the Eastern Front.

The Results of the Battle of Kursk

The two armies the Germans used at Kursk comprised their entire strategic reserve.¹² As a consequence, the Germans could not afford heavy losses at Kursk because in case of a new Soviet counteroffensive, the Germans would lack the operational reserves to stop it. The problem

for the Germans became that at Kursk they did suffer heavily. The losses ended up seriously depleting their mobile strategic reserve.

After the Soviets halted this last German offensive, they launched their own counteroffensive. They now had sufficient resources to maintain the momentum. The Germans on the other hand had used up the reserves that could have still produced a stalemate. Almost all mobile reserves were exhausted. The Soviet advance continued during the autumn and winter with only short halts. The Soviets halted primarily because they outran their own supply lines, and not because of German counterattacks.¹³ For offensive operations Soviet armies were normally provisioned with a ten day supply of fuel and ammunition for an advance of up to 70 miles. Beyond this range, and sometimes even short of it, inadequate transportation and a prevailing casual attitude towards the problems of logistics checked Soviet advances.¹⁴

At Kursk the Germans suffered heavy losses. The Soviets claimed that at Kursk they killed 70,000 German officers and men, and destroyed 2,952 tanks, 195 assault guns, 844 field guns and 1,392 planes.¹⁵ The Germans never released their total losses.¹⁶ Losses in individual Panzer divisions were high. After the battle the 3rd Panzer Division was left with 30 tanks out of approximately 300, the 17th Panzer had about 60, and the 19th Panzer about 17. The infantry divisions also suffered heavily, with some companies down to 40 men, while some regiments were not much stronger than that.¹⁷

The Soviets also suffered heavily. The Germans believed that in the area of the Voronezh Front they destroyed at least 1,800 Soviet tanks, more than 1,000 antitank guns, and captured 24,000 Soviet

soldiers. Immediately after Prokhorovka, Soviet tank strength was down to about half what it had been before "Citadel" started.¹⁸ However, the Soviets owned the battlefield. This meant that they were able to recover and repair many damaged tanks.¹⁹ This helped the Soviets to refit their tank units quickly and go over the offensive.

Though both armies suffered heavily, the Soviets could absorb the losses while the Germans could not. By 1943 the Soviet Union was producing more war equipment than Germany. At the same time, lend lease shipments from the United States provided an increasing amount of needed supplies. This included jeeps and trucks, that helped the Soviets resupply their advancing armies. In addition, their larger population allowed the Soviets to replace their casualties more easily while producing more war items. Although the German industrial output was higher than ever, it was still lower than the Soviet Union's. To make matters worse, the Germans were also competing with the industrial capacity of the United States and Great Britain. No matter how much the Germans produced, they could never compete with the combined resources of the Allies. The Allies would always have more men and equipment than Germany. For these reasons, the losses at Kursk became extremely important, especially to Germany, because they came at a time when Germany could ill afford them.

When the Anglo-Americans landed in Sicily on 10 July, Hitler had to move forces to Italy. A landing in Italy now became a possibility. In addition, the Germans knew that the Anglo-Americans would sooner or later land on the continent. The Germans needed more divisions in Italy, France and the Soviet Union, but they simply did not have the resources

to create them. Hitler was paying the price of getting Germany into a two front war.

After Kursk the Soviets knew that, pending an unexpected event, they could not lose the war. After the Battle of Stalingrad, even Stalin was cautious about saying anything that implied the war was definitely won. On his 23 February 1943 Red Army Day order, Stalin said that the real struggle was only beginning. He also said that further blows were needed before Germany was decisively defeated in the Eastern Front. However, after the victory at Kursk, he had no more reservations. After "Citadel" and the recapture of Orel and Belgorod, Stalin for the first time ordered the salute guns of Moscow to fire a victory salute. This was the first victory salute in an unbroken series of salutes to come.²⁰

Marshal Zhukov wrote that it was after Kursk that the Germans were finally limited to conduct primarily defensive operations. After Kursk final defeat of Germany was only a matter of time.²¹ General Rokossovsky believed that it was after Kursk that the Soviet Union turned the tide of the war. It was then that the Soviet Supreme Command took a firm hold of the initiative.²² Finally, General S. P. Ivanov, Chief of Staff of the Voronezh Front, believed that as a result of "Citadel" the strategic initiative was completely consolidated in the hands of the Soviet Union. "Citadel" created the conditions that made it possible for the Red Army to launch a general offensive. Germany was forced to go on the defensive on all theaters.²³

While the Soviets finally knew they would not lose the war, few Germans in positions of authority believed they could still win, or even achieve a stalemate. Even Hitler was ready to prepare defensive

positions 12 to 15 miles behind the main battle line. Before Kursk, he would not even consider building defensive lines, or talk about it.²⁴

The Inspector General of Armored Troops, General Heinz Guderian, viewed Kursk as a decisive defeat. The armored formations, which after Stalingrad had been reformed and reequipped, had lost heavily both in men and equipment. Guderian knew they would be unemployable for a long time. It would be very difficult to rehabilitate them in time to defend the Eastern Front. To Guderian it was even doubtful that they could be employed in the Western Front to defend against the Allied landings expected by the spring of 1944. Guderian acknowledged that from that moment on the Soviets had the undisputed possession of the initiative.²⁵

Von Manstein, who many considered to be Germany's best general, also acknowledged that after the failure of "Citadel" the Soviets had the initiative. The Soviet numerical superiority was about to make itself felt. Von Manstein considered the Soviet attack against the Orel salient as only a prelude to a major offensive. His Army Group South found itself fighting a defensive war that to him was nothing more than a system of improvisations and stop gaps.²⁶

If the Germans had decided to remain on the defensive in 1943 and continued to build an armored reserve, they could have gained a stalemate in the East, as von Manstein believed.²⁷ Instead, by throwing their armor against the heavily fortified Kursk salient, they suffered losses which proved impossible to replace. The Germans so depleted their armored forces that they could no longer build a mobile reserve. After failing for the first time to break through the Soviet lines in a major

offensive, the Germans now had to adopt a defensive strategy under unfavorable conditions.²⁸

Without a strategic reserve, Germany was unable to stabilize the front, mount major counterattacks, or again seize the initiative in the Eastern Front. After the Battle of Moscow in 1941, Germany was able to stabilize the front and resume offensive operations by the summer of 1942. The 1942 campaign culminated at Stalingrad with the destruction of the German 6th Army. After Stalingrad, however, Germany was able to again stabilize the front, counterattack at Kharkov, and regain the initiative. This did not happen after the Battle of Kursk. After Kursk Germany launched no more summer offensives on the Eastern Front.

Before "Citadel" it was still possible for Germany to assume a successful strategic defense and mount limited attacks that could gain a stalemate for Germany on the Eastern Front. After "Citadel" the situation changed. The Germans could not even successfully maintain a strategic defense. Soviet offensives seldom stopped after Operation "Citadel." By the end of 1943 the Soviets had recaptured the cities of Smolensk, Kharkov, and Kiev, and most of the Ukraine. In 1944 they would completely expel the Germans from the Soviet Union, and move into East Prussia and Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union was becoming a world power. The Russian steamroller that never materialized in World War I became a reality in World War II.

Each successive German summer offensive on the Eastern Front produced decreasing results. The 1941 offensive failed to produce victory, but only after the Germans had advanced as far as Moscow and inflicted massive losses on the Soviets. The 1942 offensive failed, but

not before the Germans reached Stalingrad and the Caucasus. Between 1939 and 1942 the Germans had always enjoyed success in the summer. The Soviets had never defeated a German summer offensive. Kursk changed that. For the first time a German summer offensive had been defeated without achieving any success. The Battle of Kursk finally proved that the fortunes of war had shifted in favor of the Allies. Finally, for the first time in the war, the Soviets began offensive operations under favorable conditions and in good weather.

Implications for Today

The Battle of Kursk was the greatest tank engagement of World War II. Because of its mechanized nature, it has many lessons that are still valid for today's armored operations. The Battle of Kursk demonstrates the benefits of applying the principles outlined in the U.S. Army doctrinal manual FM 100-5 (1993), Operations. It also shows the consequences of violating them.

Two of the characteristics of offensive operations discussed in FM 100-5 are surprise and concentration. Commanders achieve surprise by striking at the enemy at a time or place or in a manner for which the enemy is not physically or mentally ready. Concentration is the ability to mass the effects of combat power. By concentrating forces rapidly along converging axes, the attacker overwhelms enemy forces at the point of attack by massing combat power. FM 100-5 also specifies that on offensive operations commanders must avoid the enemy's main strength at the point of attack.²⁹ The idea is to strike at the enemy's weaknesses and not his strengths.

At the Battle of Kursk, the Germans concentrated large armored forces against narrow flanks of the Kursk salient. However, they attacked through one of the most heavily fortified zones of the Soviet front. Instead of avoiding the enemy's strengths, the Germans attacked through it and suffered heavy casualties. It is very difficult to find a worse place for the Germans to conduct offensive operations in the summer of 1943 than the Kursk salient. The Germans took so many losses that in the end they could no longer proceed with their advance, within days giving up their few territorial gains.

The German offensive plan consisted of attacking with two pincers designed to encircle Soviet forces inside the Kursk salient. It was a very logical plan. The tactics were the same the Germans had used before. In addition, Soviet intelligence and poor German operations security (OPSEC) gave the Soviets additional information on German intentions. As a result, the Soviets knew what was coming. There was absolutely no surprise. For three months the Soviets prepared their defenses in depth. This, and the fact that the Germans attacked precisely through these defenses, against fully prepared Soviet positions, were two factors that ensured the German defeat in Operation "Citadel."

The Soviets followed many of the fundamentals of defensive operations outlined in FM 100-5 to plan for and conduct operations at the Battle of Kursk. The ultimate objective of defensive operations, according to FM 100-5, is to turn to the offensive and defeat the enemy decisively. The defender withstands and holds the enemy in place, while

always seeking every opportunity to assume the offensive at the right time.³⁰

In planning their defenses for the Battle of Kursk, Zhukov and Vasilevsky always viewed their defensive posture as temporary. Zhukov's plan was to meet the expected German attack with a powerful defense that would wear down the Germans. The Soviets would then launch their own counteroffensive.³¹ Zhukov's ultimate objective was to switch over to the offensive as soon as the situation became favorable. Zhukov's plan is an excellent historical vignette useful in illustrating FM 100-5 doctrine. His plan included a counteroffensive that would give the Soviets the initiative. As a result, the Soviets did gain the initiative and never lost it.

Reserves are a very important element of the defense. According to FM 100-5, reserves give commanders the means to seize the initiative and to preserve flexibility. Reserves seek to strike a decisive blow against the attacker. Commanders can use reserves to counterattack the enemy's main effort to expedite his defeat, to reinforce forward defensive operations, and to conduct counterattacks. Commanders must also consider timing when committing reserves. If reserves are committed too soon or too late, they may not have the desired effect.³²

The Soviets minded these principles when planning for Kursk. The use of reserves became a very important element of the overall Soviet plan. The first thing the Soviets did was to ensure they had a large reserve available. The Soviets then concentrated their reserves on the Steppe Front, away from the German attacks. The Steppe Front had four field armies, one tank army, one mechanized corps, and three cavalry

corps. Zhukov planned to commit his reserves to form new defensive lines in case the Germans broke through any part of the front, stop German penetrations, reinforce Soviet counterattacks, or conduct their own counterattacks.³³

During the battle the Soviets used their reserves as Zhukov had planned. Generals Rokossovsky and Vatutin used reserves to reinforce front line units and block German penetrations. The Soviet 5th Guards Tank Army that counterattacked the German 4th Panzer Army thrust at Prokhorovka was a deployed Soviet operational reserve. This counterattack ended any hopes of a German victory at Kursk.

The timely commitment of the Soviet reserves was the key to their victory at Kursk. It was possible because the Soviets ensured that a large reserve was available, and because they committed it at the right times and places.

FM 100-5 discusses other considerations commanders and staffs must incorporate in the planning and execution of successful defensive operations. An important planning consideration is for commanders and their staffs to conduct a thorough intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB). A good IPB enables commanders and staffs to anticipate the enemy's objectives and courses of action. Another important planning consideration is the use of time. The defense is more effective when time is available (and used effectively) to deliberately occupy positions, designate security and main battle areas, fortify the ground, plan fires, install obstacles, rehearse, and coordinate maneuver, fires, and logistics support.³⁴ A final point is that a successful defense uses all arms and services to fight and defeat the enemy.³⁵ The

defender must integrate all weapon systems, and conduct combined operations to quickly defeat the enemy.

The Soviets performed all these tasks at the Battle of Kursk. Soviet intelligence was excellent prior to the battle. Zhukov possessed considerable information about German troop movements and intentions. The German attack did not come as a surprise. Zhukov used all available information to reinforce expected German avenues of approach, place his reserves where they could launch counterattacks, and to move the mass of his mobile formations out of the Kursk salient, away from danger. The Germans themselves helped Zhukov by executing a very logical plan, using the same tactics of double envelopment that by 1943 could no longer surprise the Soviets.

The Soviets also made excellent use of the available time. They had three months to build up the Kursk defenses. They used that time wisely. When the Germans attacked, they did it against one of the most heavily fortified sectors on the Eastern Front. They suffered heavily as a result. Hitler himself provided the Soviets plenty of time to build up their defenses by postponing "Citadel" so many times. However, the credit for the victory still belonged to the Soviets, for they used all the time Hitler gave them wisely, constantly improving their positions prior to the battle.

Finally, the Soviets successfully conducted combined arms operations at Kursk. The Soviets integrated into their defense all available weapon systems and all branches of their armed forces. Armor and antitank weapons reinforced the infantry positions. Each Soviet front had its own aviation units to provide air support. Engineer

obstacles and minefields strengthened the defensive positions. Field artillery provided indirect fire support to all front line and reserve units. The Battle of Kursk demonstrated that the Soviets had learned how to integrate all weapon systems to conduct defensive and offensive combined arms operations.

These are but a few of the lessons that can be learned from studying the Battle of Kursk. This was the greatest tank battle of World War II. It is probably history's greatest tank battle, with the possible exception of the Yom Kippur war in 1973. Its lessons are still applicable for today's mechanized and armored combat operations. The Battle of Kursk is full of examples that illustrate the correct application of the present U.S. Army doctrine.

Conclusions

If a decisive battle is measured in terms of the point in a war where one side gains undisputed possession of the initiative, and that the outcome is never in doubt after that, then the Battle of Kursk was the decisive battle on the Eastern front in World War II. However, it would be more correct to say that it was a series of battles, and not just one battle, that decided the outcome in the war between Germany and the Soviet Union. Without a doubt the Battle of Kursk was as decisive as the Battle of Stalingrad, even though traditionally most western historians believe that Stalingrad decided the war.

The question then becomes: what caused the German defeat on the Eastern Front in World War II? The answer is the cumulative effects of

the 1941 German offensive, which culminated with the Battle of Moscow, then the Battle of Stalingrad, and finally Kursk.

The 1941 German offensive which culminated with the Battle of Moscow caused so many losses to the Germans that they could never completely recover. German forces were attrited so badly that when they started offensive operations in 1942, they could only attack in the southern sector of the front. In 1941 Germany was strong enough to attack across the entire Soviet-German front; that was not the case in 1942.

The Battle of Stalingrad continued the process of attrition of the German forces. Stalingrad became the greatest German defeat to that point. The defeat started to weaken Germany's alliances. After Stalingrad Germany could no longer win the war, but could still conduct limited attacks designed to cause as many casualties on the Soviets as possible. This had the potential of forcing the Soviets to negotiate peace.

After the Stalingrad disaster Germany could still gain the initiative and launch offensive operations. The Battle of Kursk changed that. The process that defeated Germany started in 1941 and culminated in 1943 at Kursk. It destroyed the remaining German offensive strength. Germany was left with no strategic reserves. The Soviets held the initiative and would not let it go until the capture of Berlin in 1945. After the German failure at Kursk, as events would show, Germany could not even defend successfully.

Endnotes

¹Jonathan M. House, Towards Combined Arms Warfare: A Survey of 20th Century Tactics, Doctrine, and Organization, Combat Studies Institute Research Survey No. 2 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, August 1984), 127.

²Ibid., 126.

³S. J. Lewis, Forgotten Legions (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1985), 166.

⁴House, Towards Combined Arms Warfare, 126.

⁵David M. Glantz, Soviet Defensive Tactics at Kursk, July 1943, Combat Studies Institute Report No. 11 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, September 1986), 62-63.

⁶Ibid., 17, 19, and 20.

⁷Earl F. Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin. The German Defeat in the East (Washington, D.C.: United States Army Center of Military History, 1987), 145.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 145-146.

¹⁰Ibid., 148.

¹¹Burkhardt Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer 1933-1945, three vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1969), 3:124.

¹²Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, 126; and Walter Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters, 1939-45 (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), 333-334.

¹³B. H. Liddell Hart, The German Generals Talk (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1979), 212-213.

¹⁴Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, 148.

¹⁵John Erickson, The Road To Berlin (Boulder, CO: Westview Press Inc., 1983), 112.

¹⁶Harrison E. Salisbury, The Unknown War (New York: Bantam Books, 1978), 159.

¹⁷Erickson, The Road To Berlin, 112; and John Keegan, The Second World War (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 471.

¹⁸Erickson, The Road To Berlin, 112.

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²⁰Erickson, The Road To Berlin, 55; Keegan, The Second World War, 464; Joseph E. Thack, "The battle of Kursk, July 1943: Decisive Turning Point on the Eastern Front," (Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1971), 447; and Salisbury, The Unknown War, 159.

²¹Georgii Konstantinovich Zhukov, Marshal Zhukov's Greatest Battles (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 256.

²²K. K. Rokossovsky, "Collapse of Operation Citadel," Soviet Military Review 8 (August 1983), 11.

²³S.P. Ivanov, "On a Fiery Bulge," Soviet Military Review (July 1983), 16.

²⁴Albert Speer, Inside the Third Reich (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1970), 269.

²⁵Heinz Guderian, Panzer Leader (New York: Ballantine Books, 1957), 251.

²⁶Erich von Manstein, Lost Victories (California: Presidio Press, 1994), 450.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 443.

²⁸Thomas E. Griess, ed., The Second World War: Europe and the Mediterranean (The West Point Military History Series. Wayne, New Jersey: Avery Publishing Group, Inc., 1989), 149.

²⁹U. S. Army, FM 100-5, Field Service Regulations—Operations (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 14 June 1993), 7-0 - 7-2, 8-2.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 6-23, and 9-0.

³¹Zhukov, Greatest Battles, 216.

³²FM 100-5 (1993), 9-5 and 10-6.

³³Zhukov, Greatest Battles, 215, 216, 222, and 229.

³⁴FM 100-5 (1993), 10-2 - 10-3.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 6-20, 9-0.

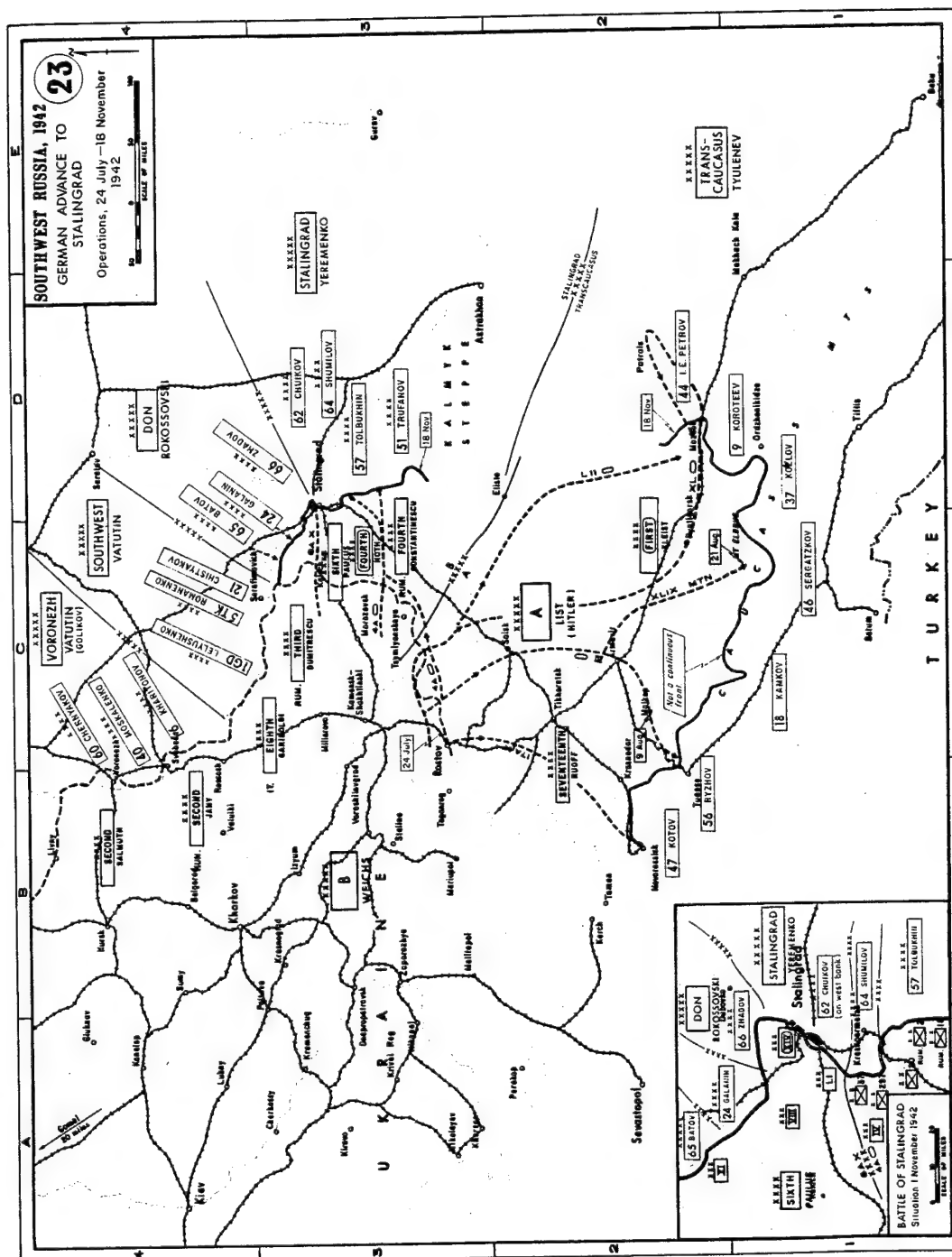


Figure 2. Source: Thomas E. Griess, ed., Campaign Atlas to the Second World War (Wayne, New Jersey: Avery Publishing Group, 1989), map 23.

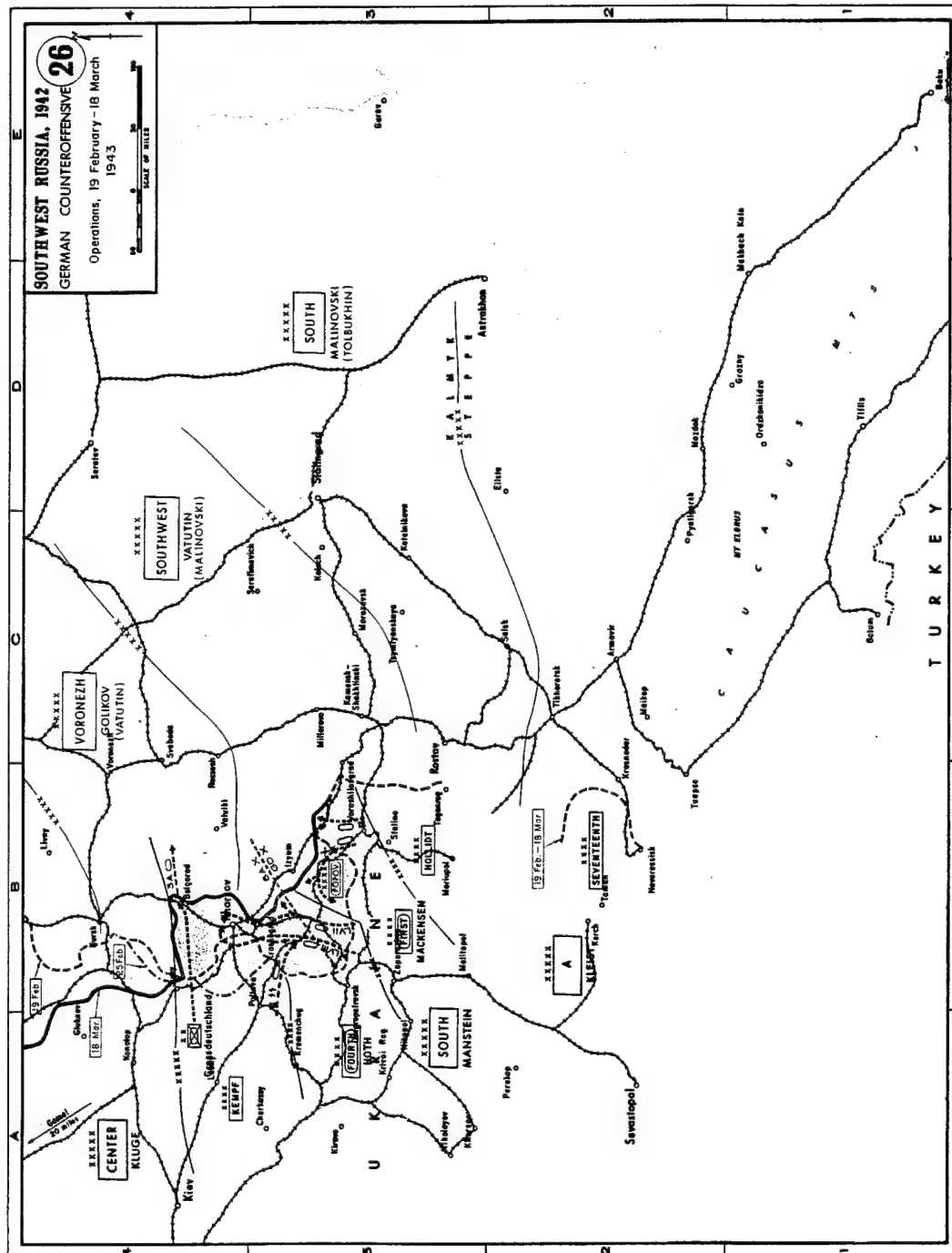


Figure 4. Source: Thomas E. Griess, ed., Campaign Atlas to the Second World War (Wayne, New Jersey: Avery Publishing Group, 1989), map 26.

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